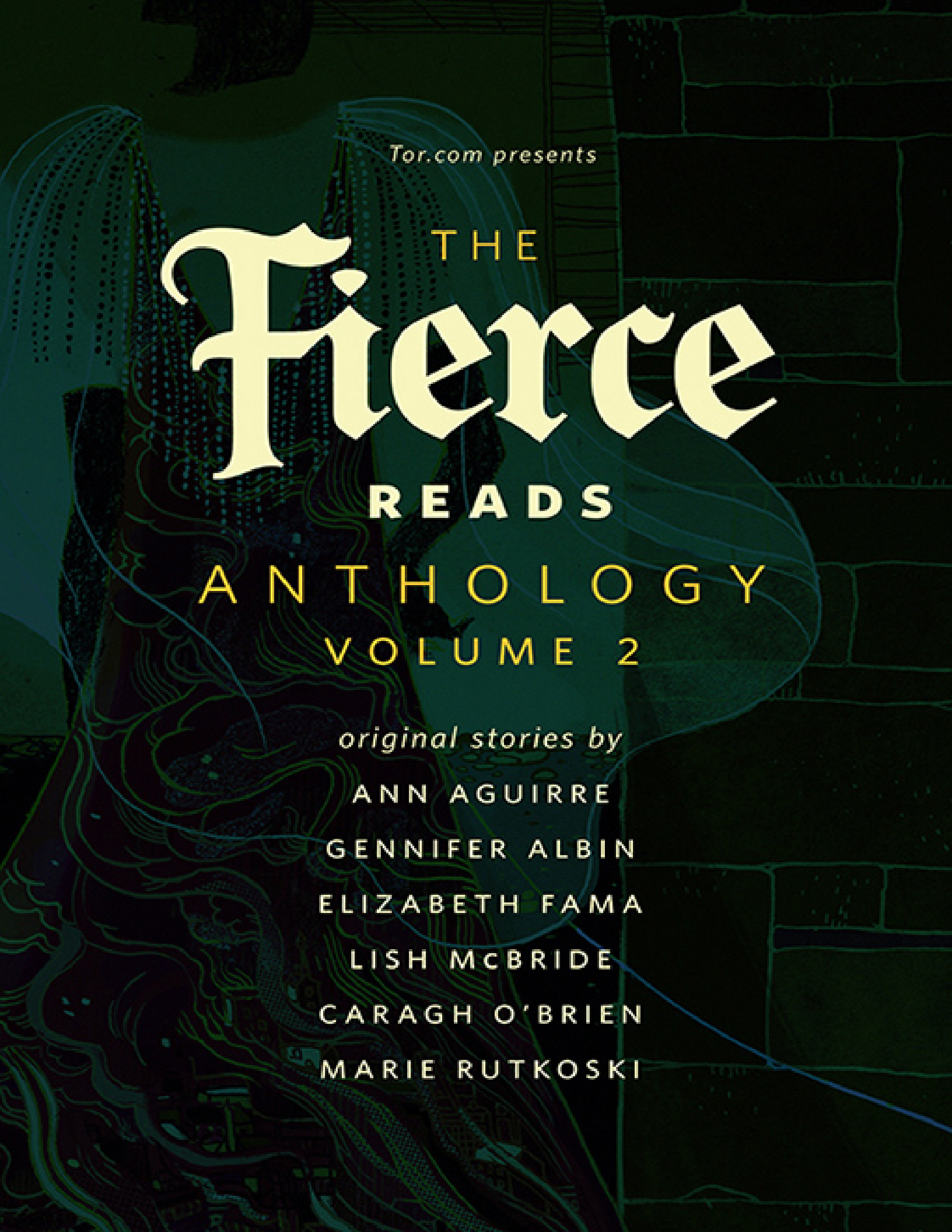
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ANN AGUIRRE
FOUNDATION

ANN AGUIRRE

Foundation

illustration by

VICTO NGAI

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Begin Reading

I don’t remember how the sun feels.

It’s an abstract concept for me, something I know exists, but doesn’t have the meaning it once did. When we first came down, my mom and dad said it was just for a few weeks, just a precaution. The outbreaks in the city came from some biological agent released in Times Square, I guess, and the news was full of conflicting reports on whether it came from North Korea or Iran. Other sites had other theories, but it was a coordinated strike, targeting cities all over the world.

At the time, I didn’t know why—or even what—was happening. I was thirteen when my parents quietly bought a unit in the bunkers. By that point, the city was bad enough that my mother no longer went out to do the marketing. Instead, she called a service that brought our food, and she didn’t let the courier come into the apartment, either. He left our groceries in the foyer with the doorman, who then scanned to make sure there were no foreign objects in the boxes or suspicious contaminants present.

By this point, I had stopped attending school. I was nine when they declared a state of national emergency and the country went to martial law, trying to contain the damage. Whole sectors of the city were designated hazardous and quarantined accordingly. My dad said the heavily armed soldiers in the streets patrolled to protect me, so I wasn’t to worry about them. They would soon restore order and things would get back to normal. Though I didn’t know it at the time, he was totally wrong.

For us, normal ended on May 5 when the chemicals exploded in Times Square.

The world never recovered.

It’s funny, but when I look back over my childhood, I see a progression of my world getting smaller. At five, I went on a plane with my parents and the whole universe lay open before me. There was a white beach with sand soft as powder and an endless blue ocean; the air was balmy, and it was an island, covered in mountains. I remember asking if this was heaven, and my mother laughed. She said, “It’s not heaven, Robin, but it *is* paradise.”

There were other wonders on that trip, but I was so young that they've begun to fade, colors running together like a painting left out in the rain. I mind this fiercely because it feels like time is stealing what little I have left. After we came home, I went to school, and my world was my teacher and twenty-four other students. Then it narrowed further to my parents and the walls of the apartment with the occasional supervised trip outdoors.

And when I was thirteen, they took away the sun. I argued. I sulked. I tried to convince my parents they were overreacting—we didn't need to go live underground like rabbits, but they were afraid. The streets teemed with people who had been infected with the Metanoia Virus, and public services couldn't cope with them all. My parents told me these unfortunates were unable to hold a job; their health and mental abilities had been permanently compromised. In time, they promised, the government would help the sick. I wasn't sure shooting them or rounding them up in trucks counted as help, but I got used to hearing automatic-weapons fire and the rumble of large engines as I fell asleep.

That morning, the bunker company sent an armed escort to take us from our apartment. We put on special clothing and masks that would allegedly protect us. I rode in an armored vehicle for the first time—and the last—that day. We went into a tall building, down some stairs, and through a heavy, heavy door. My parents signed some documents, and then we took possession of our new home.

"It's so small," my mother said.

My father put an arm around her. "We'll get used to it. We'll make do. This is just a precaution, just for a little while, until they get things back in order."

Now, I wonder if he knew, if he suspected.

For the first year, we maintained contact with the outside world. The air we breathed was regulated and filtered, our food was expensive and packaged "like the astronauts eat," according to my mother. That was supposed to make it more exciting, but I had to force my mine down. Sometimes I wondered what the point of survival was, if this was what we had to do; it seemed there was nothing in the world worth saving.

Then silence fell. Reports stopped coming. I was fourteen years old. My mother spent all day weeping when the news sites went quiet. Another day, she pressed random keys on the terminal, trying to get anyone to respond. And that was when we found the local intercom.

Oh, we had known there were others in units nearby. We had seen the doors when we took possession of our unit, but the manager said it was best we didn't mingle because opening the hermetic seal on our doors increased the risk of contagion. The company did its best to guarantee a 100 percent contaminant-free atmosphere, but that warranty existed only in our bunker, not in the public areas like the hallway. Which should be safe, but there was no guarantee.

The terminal beeped, and then a voice said, "Hello?"

He sounded young.

My mother lost interest when she realized she hadn't contacted the authorities for a status update. Someone who sounded like that couldn't know any more than we did. So she stepped away and I took her place. A few more keystrokes and I had an image on-screen. I had spent most of my time sleeping, drawing, or reading, as I hadn't been a tech person even before we came down here. In the bunker, I sketched furiously, as if I could keep the world alive by capturing my memories of it.

"Are you inside too?" the boy asked.

I nodded and told him our unit number. "You?"

"I'm in three F. Austin Shelley," he added, as if I had asked.

"Robin Schiller." I couldn't think of a good way to ask this, so I just came out with it. "Have you talked to anyone or heard anything—"

"No. This is the first contact I've had with anyone outside our flat in almost a year."

He had dark brown hair, green eyes, and a thin face with the concentrated pallor of one who hasn't been outdoors in a while. I'd probably be showing the same lack, if I didn't have my father's dark skin. From my mother, I'd gotten hazel eyes and my interest in drawing. I'd never been outdoorsy or sporty, and I was lucky my dad didn't care about such things too much. Before, he had some idea I might be a doctor like him, but with the way things had changed, I didn't think much about the future.

Even then, I suspected I might not have one.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Almost a year, since I was fourteen."

That made him a year older than me. Surprising, how much I liked knowing I wasn't the only one my age down here. He might understand

how alone I felt and how impossible everything seemed. I wanted to chat more, but there was no chance, that day.

“Robin,” my mother said. “Come away. Your father wants to talk to you.”

“Will you call me again?” Austin asked.

“Yes,” I said quickly. I memorized the colors currently lit on the terminal. “Soon, I promise.”

My parents sat me down and explained that it was likely we wouldn’t be going back up. If the world was in such bad shape that the infrastructure had collapsed, they didn’t see us returning. Which meant I had to adjust to the small life we currently knew. Two years ago, I would’ve protested. But I had grown up a bit since then. I understood the limitations, and I only nodded.

Early the next morning while my mom and dad were still asleep, I used the terminal to call Austin. It wasn’t so much that I thought they would mind as the fact that I wanted something of my own. Since we lived in one room, it had gotten harder to remember when I had hours to myself, no one looking at my drawings over my shoulder.

He answered on the first ring, his voice a sleepy whisper. “Robin?”

“You asked me to—”

“I know. Not about anything specific. I’m just tired of talking to my parents. My mother’s trying to pretend this will be over shortly.”

“It might be,” I said. “But probably not in the way she hopes.”

The video aspect of the call stayed dark, as lights and moving images would wake our parents in a way that whispers might not. So his sigh came across with poignant clarity. I imagined his fear echoed my own, but I didn’t mention it. We didn’t know each other well enough to share such things.

“What did you do, before?” It was an open question.

“I was at a charter school, studying art. I’m fourteen,” I added, because he might not have been able to tell from the quick glimpse yesterday.

“My parents called me home from military academy just before they dropped the bomb about the bunker.”

“I don’t know anything about boarding school. Did you like it?”

His hesitation told me the answer was no. “I got used to it.”

At that point, my parents stirred, so I whispered, “Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Please.” It was the tacked-on “please” that made me determined not to miss a day.

I suspected Austin Shelley was lonely like me.

After that, the days fell in to a routine. Austin would have been a year ahead of me in school, for what little such things mattered these days. He had wanted to become an architect—though that seemed unlikely now—and he was fascinated by how things worked. I ticked off the days in my journal, each one bringing a fresh conversation with my new friend.

Thirty-four days after I first called Austin Shelley, my father sat me down. At first, I thought it meant they’d learned my secret and I was about to get a lecture, but instead, my parents wanted to discuss our current living conditions. Apparently, they thought it wasn’t healthy for us to be cooped up like animals in an exhibit.

“We’ve discussed the risks at length,” my father said, “and your mother and I agree that we should get to know the other families down here.”

“Yes. If we’re stuck, we might as well make the best of it,” my mother added with a determinedly cheerful expression.

I’d seen that look many times, just before she offered me the lesser of two evils, but I was tired of our four walls, however expensive they had been. Safety at the cost of new experiences tasted like stale, unleavened bread. So later that day, my father unsealed the door and we stepped into the hallway beyond. Inside our bunker it was easier to pretend, but here, it was definitely grim and institutional, constructed quickly in answer to the growing unease. Other doors opened around us, and in their *shhh* sounds I heard a tacit acceptance that this was our new reality.

Six families. Six bunkers.

Four of them had children, but most were younger. I might end up watching them to give their parents a break, but they’d never be my friends. Not like Austin. He came toward me with a shy half-smile, like he felt odd about meeting someone with whom he’d been talking in whispers for over a month. I knew exactly how he felt. This was possibly the worst party ever; since we all had the same rations, there was nothing to offer but our company.

I offered my hand, and he shook it, solemn-faced. As far as our parents were concerned, we were strangers, but he had been a lifeline across days that seemed so alike as to have no end. And sometimes I had dark thoughts,

like, *is survival at this cost even* worth *it*? Most days, the answer was yes, but occasionally it was just because I knew he was waiting to hear from me.

Austin was taller than me by at least four inches. At military school, they probably made him participate in team sports too. I beckoned for him to come into our unit, away from the kids chasing one another up and down the hall. There were five of them, not including us, which meant some families had more than one. I couldn't imagine how they were coping with the reduced space. Probably, their mothers put them on the exercise machine and made them use it until they exhausted all their energy.

"So this is you," he said, and then his pale cheeks colored.

I pretended I thought he meant our apartment instead of acknowledging it as a lame version of *so we meet at last.* "Is it like your place?"

"Pretty much."

"This is the sketch book I was telling you about. I'm almost out of pages. But I like this one—" I broke off, conscious that he was studying me, not the book. "Do I look…different than you expected?"

It was an issue for some people that my father was a different color than my mother. Fervently I hoped that wouldn't be the case for Austin; he shook his head quickly, eyes dropping to the floor and then back to mine again.

"It's just…odd," he managed finally.

He's shy, I guessed.

Ordinarily, I could be too, but we'd talked enough in the mornings that he felt like an old friend. So maybe if I treated him that way, he would relax. I hoped so. For me, he offered the bright spot at the start of each day.

"Everything is."

"I don't draw people," he said then. "But I have some designs. Buildings. Would you like to see?" Again, the touch of color.

I couldn't figure out why he was so awkward with me, unless it was the weight of knowing the private things we'd whispered to each other without ever expecting the doors would open. Maybe I had played a priestly role in his mind, that of confessor, but now that I was standing here, it felt different. I followed Austin next door to find that his unit was a precise mirror of ours, every amenity, each feature.

Carefully, I paged through his sketches, then tapped one. "This is amazing. I've never seen anything like it. Where did you see it?"

"That's one I wanted to build. After I became an architect."

His green eyes swam with desperation and sorrow because now, that was an impossible dream. And there was nothing I could say to turn the world right side up again. My goals had always been smaller—to draw or paint. Maybe I could still do that on a reduced scale, but Austin couldn't. Everything he wanted had been stolen from him.

"I'm sorry," I said, but it wasn't enough.

For a few seconds, I covered his hand with mine. I'd seen my dad do it countless times with patients, but this felt…different. A little spark went through me. I'd always known I was odd—not in the sense that I preferred boys over girls, but in the sense that it didn't matter. Most times, I'd rather keep company with a beautiful painting, lost in my own head. But on the two occasions when my interest had been roused, it was by what went on in their hearts and minds, not the physical trappings. In my admittedly light romantic past, there had been a couple of crushes and one kiss.

His chin dipped so he wasn't looking at me anymore. "It's probably for the best. I'd only have fought with my dad about it."

But he didn't pull his hand away. In fact, he shifted until it lay palm up beneath mine. I had never been so conscious of the heat of my skin against someone else's. The touch gave me a fluttery feeling in my stomach, and I didn't know if I should lace our fingers together, but I think he was waiting for some kind of cue he didn't receive because a few seconds later, he drew back.

"You don't get along?"

That opened the door to a flood of confidences he imparted in his morning voice, soft enough that it created a familiar bond. We had been talking for an hour when our families decided we should return to isolation with promises to repeat the meeting soon. I wished I could stay with Austin, but things would change soon enough—and in ways I couldn't have predicted then. If I've learned anything since those days, it's not to wish too hard for a shift in circumstances since it never happens as you imagine.

A month later, the Markowitz parents fell ill. The oldest child called our unit, sobbing, as she begged my father to come and save them. He was only doctor in the bunkers; my mother implored him not to go. I understood her caution, but I also knew why he would ultimately refuse her.

"I have to try, Mel. You know that."

"Don't go," she pleaded, as if she *knew*. "Call the administrator."

Ostensibly, there was a corporate representative here to make sure nothing went wrong. He did periodic checks, but he didn't socialize with us, didn't communicate more than necessary. Likely he had orders to that effect as it would be impossible to hand down unpopular edicts if he got too close.

Before my father could reply, the comm sounded, an official tone. "I regret to inform you that there was a fault in the ventilation systems. All units may have been exposed to outside toxins. Naturally, a full refund will be issued."

"A refund," my mother repeated, looking numb. "What good will that do us? Jeremy, I can't watch you and Robby die."

I ached because she hadn't called me that in so long, not since I was a little kid. My dad wore a tight, brave expression, but I saw terror in his dark eyes. His hands curled in to fists, as my calm, unflappable father fought the urge to take out his rage on the furnishings. I had never been so frightened in my life.

"I have to check on the Markowitz family," he said softly.

"Jeremy—"

"Stop it. If we're already been exposed, then it doesn't matter. You know that."

Exposed. Such a small word to contain so much horror and vulnerability. My mother took to her bed after my father left; first she cried until she had no voice, then she took a pair of pills that let her sleep. Looking back, I can say she was a sweet woman, but she wasn't strong. That day, Austin called me for the first time while our parents were awake. Time seemed too precious for secrets now.

"I guess you heard," he said.

"Yeah. My dad is making rounds, trying to help."

"Mine is—" The audio cut in and out, revealing the fury his dad didn't bother to contain.

"Come over. You shouldn't be around him when he's so mad." I could hear bits of the rant about how Mr. Shelley would sue the company, but it was all sound and fury. Even the colonel knew there would be no legal recourse in the new world rising from the ashes of the old. That was part of why he was so angry.

Austin didn't ask permission from his parents; if we were all dying anyway, what did obedience matter? He slipped into our unit with minimum fuss. Here, it was quiet at least.

“I don’t want to die,” he whispered in our morning voice.

A lump comprised of equal parts fear and sympathy rose in my throat. “Me either.”

“I’m not ready. I mean, I always knew it might come to this, but part of me believed my old man. He could buy his way out of anything. Even this.” His voice broke. “Turns out, not so much.”

“I tried to pretend it wasn’t happening. Live in my own head.”

Somehow he went into my arms or I went into his and we tangled, hard. He was shaking, or I was. So hard, knowing the air you breathed might be what killed you. Austin smelled exactly like me; he used the same company-provided soap and toiletries, but it was a little better on him, deeper and richer, or it might’ve been the alchemy of his skin. If it hadn’t been for my mother asleep behind us—or the fact that my father could come back at any moment—I might’ve done more than hold him, if I’d been that brave, then. In truth, I wasn’t; and it might’ve felt like taking advantage anyway when he was so obviously upset.

He didn’t go back to his unit that night. Austin slept in my bed, curled against my back. My mother didn’t wake. In the morning, I roused to a comforting arm over my waist; it was the first time I’d slept the night through with another person. I wondered if he would regret the need and vulnerability, but he didn’t seem to. Nor did he appear in any hurry to go back next door.

By the time my father returned, he looked exhausted, dark rings about his eyes. The slump of his shoulders told me it hadn’t gone well at the Markowitz place.

“Bad?” I guessed.

“The parents died in the night.”

I bit out a word I wasn’t supposed to use, and my father didn’t even chide me. “That was fast.”

“The oldest girl has it, and there’s nothing I can do for her, but the younger two seem to be all right. The administrator collected the bodies.”

“So we just wait to die?” Austin demanded.

My father shook his head. “I don’t know, son. The girls will be over here shortly, once they finish packing. I hope you don’t mind looking after them. I need to get some sleep. Is your mother—”

“She’s not handling it well.”

But she was suffering from more than self-medication. Illness followed, so she grew weaker and weaker. My mother never said my name again. Never called me Robby. As she lingered near death, I held in the tears through sheer force of will. Even Austin's hand on my shoulder didn't help, though it felt nice. She died just before midnight.

The oldest Markowitz girl also died that night—or maybe the administrator hurried her along. He was a cold-faced man and quick with a needle; I resolved never to be alone with him. Soon, we had two little orphaned girls underfoot, and Austin stayed with us until his mother came for him, wearing a look unlike any I've ever seen.

"I know you and the colonel have had your differences, but you need to say good-bye."

He shot me a panicked glance and I stood reflexively. "Do you mind if I come?"

Mrs. Shelley shook her head. "He's sick, you know."

I shrugged. "My father's been tending people. Both these girls lost their families to the plague. If I haven't gotten it by now, maybe I'm immune."

I shouldn't have said that.

Austin's father passed that night, and by morning, I was burning with fever. I gloss over this part of the story because I can't remember much about it. Some things are crystal clear, even at a remove of years, but not this. There were broken mirrors in my head, sweat and pain, a glimpse of my father's heartbroken face and green eyes luminous with tears.

I'm told I lay near death for seven days, and on the seventh, I came out of it. I recovered. In our small cross section of the populace, I'm the only one who did. A few simply never got sick. By the time the dying stopped, our small community had been decimated.

Of the original twenty-five, six of us lived. Me, Austin, my father, his mother, and the two Markowitz girls. After overhearing some cryptic comments from the administrator, we talked it over and decided to abandon the bunkers. There was apparently a vaccine, but it hadn't been thoroughly tested, and in some cases, it was making things worse. Instead of merely dying, some people were…. changing. It sounded alarming—and I didn't want the company using us as test subjects for their faulty medicine or cleaning us up as a failed experiment.

We had to get away. To hide. So the next morning, we packed up everything we could carry—and it wasn't much. The walk was…harrowing.

I’d never realized there was a whole world beneath the city, but there clearly was. People lived down here in warrens and tunnels—pale folk with shining eyes and suspicious stares. Most didn’t look kindly on strangers and moved us along.

But after endless turns, endless twists through a dark world, we found a place that welcomed us. They were a fairly new settlement, calling themselves the College enclave, because of a nearby subway stop, I guess. And when they found out we had a doctor among us, they drew back the barricades and welcomed us. On the surface, most had been homeless, drug addicts or alcoholics, those that society threw away. Down here, they had the power.

In a heartbeat, everything changes.

“They’re evacuating the city,” one of the settlers told us. “Apparently it’s uninhabitable up there right now.”

Another shrugged. “We wouldn’t have qualified for evac anyway. They’re shortlisting those who can contribute to society.”

A dusky-skinned man with dreadlocks said, “Down here, we all can. We do. Doctor, do you mind checking out my little girl?”

Because he always did, my father said yes—and the rest of us found a little piece of ground to call our own. It was dark, cramped, and smelled a bit, of smoke and other, less pleasant things. I felt sure I’d get used to it. Life had already shifted so much.

Austin laced his fingers through mine and drew me away from the others. “It’s better than the bunkers,” he said softly, his tone more hopeful than certain.

“I hope so. At least we’re not at the company’s mercy. Let them try to find us here.”

His expression became exultant, defiant, even. He put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me against the wall, then kissed me with such surety and promise. No more waiting for cues, apparently. Since he had been for me, almost from the moment I heard his voice in the dark, I curled my hand into his hair. There had been one touch of lips to mine before this, but *this* was the kiss I would cherish and remember, a kiss to obliterate all others. I was breathless when he stopped.

“I wasn’t sure if you…” he started, then he shifted to, “I was afraid.”

“Don’t ever be. Not with me.”

That night, the original settlers decided we needed some rules to follow; each of us should serve a purpose. Austin was confident that night, possibly because of us. And so he said, “You should divide up jobs like an old-school tribe. Some people hunt, others build.”

Most people laughed, but the chief said, “What about the rest?”

“They breed to keep numbers up, naturally. But not too much. We want to survive, not overpopulate.”

To my surprise, they ratified his idea. And it worked well for a long time. My father lasted ten years down there; Mrs. Shelley passed on shortly thereafter. The Markowitz girls had sons and daughters. And Austin? He was a builder, even down here; oh, he crafted the most marvelous things. I helped him in that. Austin Shelley was also the love of my life.

I lost him two years ago.

And I am so very tired now. My name is Robin Schiller, and I have come to the end of my life. In this final recounting, I entrust my tale to you, my pupil; you are the first Wordkeeper. In this world, words matter. Sometimes they’re all we have. So I entrust mine to you. Let them be remembered.

Let it be so.

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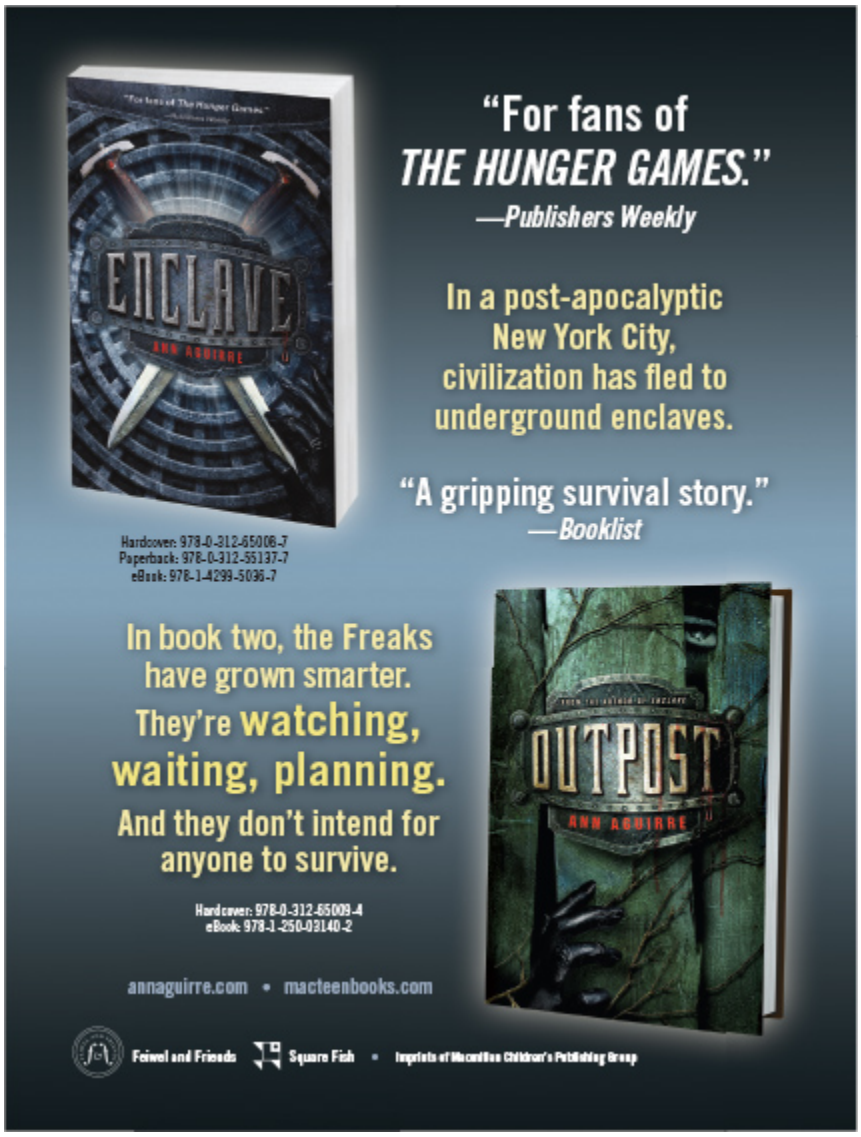
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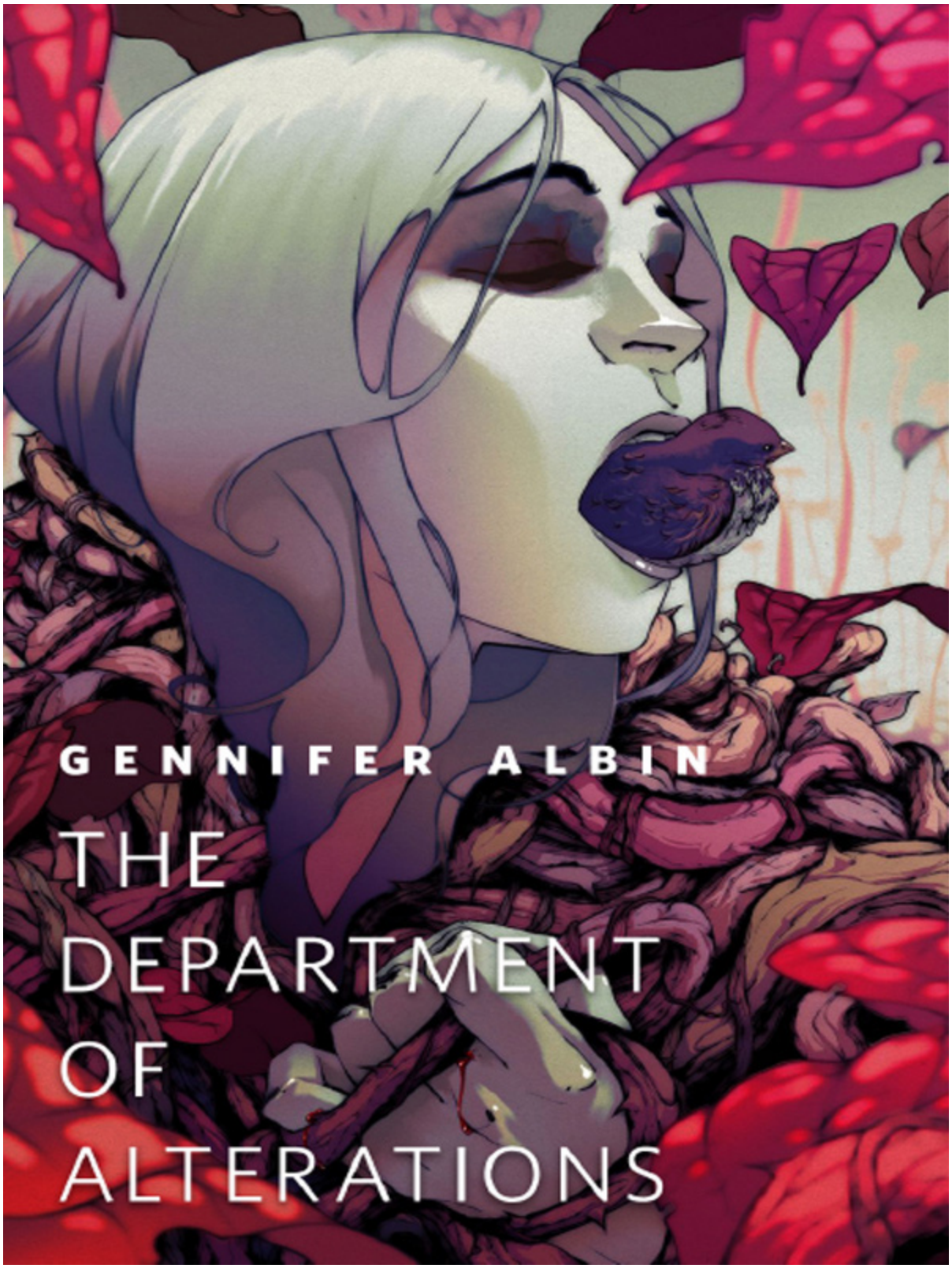
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Begin Reading

Preview

The tailor trailed his fingers across Karoline Swander's stomach in a way that felt too personal, but she didn't object. Instead she sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for him to be done. She stared at the cement ceiling and wondered how he could operate in an area so close to Romen's busy metro center.

"You must be desperate," he said, not bothering to spare her feelings.

"I'd prefer if we didn't talk," she said in a quiet voice.

"Whatever works for you, sister," he said. He came into view, peering down over her, smiling a bit too much. "As long as you have the credits, that is."

"I didn't bring credits," she said.

The tailor stepped back and raised his hands.

"Deal's off."

"No, wait," she said, struggling to sit up and lower her blouse at the same time. "I brought this."

She held out a pearl necklace.

"How sweet. A gift?" he asked, taking it and examining each gem carefully.

"Does it matter?"

"It does if you stole it," he said.

"No one steals in Romen," Karoline said automatically.

This made him laugh. It was a wheezy, low chuckle that was more mocking than amused. "No, not in our fair metro."

Karoline didn’t respond to this, she just watched him. She was here after all, breaking the law. It was no longer impossible to believe others might do the same.

“Is it enough?” she asked.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, pocketing the strand. “But for that, I can’t guarantee it will work.”

“But they’re real,” she protested.

“And hard to move. Don’t worry. This isn’t easy, but I can do it.”

Karoline hesitated. She could still leave. Her husband would never notice the pearls were gone. “Have you done this before?”

“This? No. But I’ve done worse.”

Somehow she didn’t find this reassuring.

“So, you don’t want your husband to know that his—”

“No.” She interrupted him. “Of course not. Will he realize?”

“Relax,” the tailor said. “I just assumed. When someone shows up with valuables and not credits, it’s because they don’t want someone to know. And when women show up, asking for alterations, you can bet their husband is that *someone*.”

“You said you didn’t do this often,” Karoline pointed out.

“Not this. But most women don’t want what you want. Similar problem, similar fixes, but very different results. In fact, you’re lucky, I just had one earlier. Only reason I can do this now.”

Karoline’s stomach turned over. She supposed the material had to come from somewhere, but she didn’t need him to elucidate further.

“Your husband isn’t going to ask questions, is he?” the tailor asked.

She thought of yesterday’s supper and the pinched face her husband had made when she told him about her trip to the clinic. He’d never bothered to come to a clinic appointment. He hadn’t been tested. The doctor had made it clear the problem was Karoline’s alone. The memory of her last visit at the clinic swam to mind unbidden.

“Doctor.” She hesitated on the title. “Could the problem be with my husband?”

The older gentleman gave her a sharp look. “I doubt that, Mrs. Swander.”

“I don’t think he cares how it happens,” she told the tailor. *None of them do*.

“That’s what they all think.” He handed her a small mask. “Put this on.”

Karoline didn’t ask questions. She wouldn’t be marked variant. As a minister’s wife, she should have the connections to get on a reweave list, but her husband was adamant that adoption was not an option. Nor was he willing to use his influence to get her advanced treatment. He was simultaneously barricading her and pushing her forward, and the psychological discord of it all sent her nerves into a violent tantrum. As the oxygen seeped into her mouth and nostrils, she felt herself calm.

“There you go,” he said. “I’m using a touch of stimulant in that to keep the valpron from knocking you out flat.”

Normally she would have objected to this, but she felt so nice. The calm spread through her limbs, curled into her fingers and toes, and left her placid and yielding on the table.

“Let’s see if we can make your husband happy,” he said, lifting her shirt up and running his hands over her bare flesh. Karoline didn’t mind at all now, but the tailor’s insistence on bringing up her husband turned her mind to the previous evening.

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She had decided to bring the topic up to Max at the dinner table before he retired to watch the stream. But conversation was a struggle, choked by indifference. She didn’t care much about the inner workings of the local minster’s office. Or their boring politics. Except when they involved policies regarding medical release or procreation standards. But he’d stopped bringing those topics up. He did not appreciate her impassioned views on the matter. Almost as much as he didn’t appreciate her faulty womb.

However, the longer she waited to persuade him, the less time he might have to exert his influence on the advisory committee.

“I saw Dr. Powell today,” she said. She laid her fork down. She hadn’t eaten a bite anyway. Max had either not noticed or decided not to comment.

“Yes?” he asked. Interest colored his face. He was listening to her.

Karoline held her breath, knowing how quickly his expression would change. She savored his alert eyes for a moment. “He is passing my files to

the advisory committee to get approval for further patching."

Max's eyes faded back down to his plate and he continued eating. Once he might have offered a halfhearted condolence.

"He thinks we should consider getting on a reweave list," she continued.

This time when he looked at her, his eyes blazed. "That is not an option. You may tell him that."

"I don't think it would make a difference. If we aren't approved for further patching—"

"We'll keep trying."

"Without the patching…" She stumbled over the words. She didn't want to finish the statement—didn't want to tell him there was no hope. "Could you speak with someone at the office?"

"And admit to them that you can't have a baby?" he asked. "I'm embarrassed enough."

It wasn't the first time he had voiced his shame over their familial status, but it still sucked the air from her lungs, leaving only the ache of future tears in her chest.

But she'd caught his attention now, and this time he continued, his rage spilling out. "I've already kept you away from enough events that people expect me to announce your pregnancy. If you would at least dress like the wife of an official, I wouldn't have to worry about their assumptions. You should hear what they whisper about you, about *me*, with what they have seen of you."

"What do they whisper?" she dared to ask, but then immediately regretted it as Max's fists curled into balls.

"You know what they whisper about men who don't have children. Even having a wife doesn't put those rumors to bed, especially a wife who looks like you."

He left her then, disappearing into his den. Karoline didn't let the tears escape as she washed the dishes. She'd long ago perfected the art of keeping them imprisoned there. The only thing worse than not being able to cry would be allowing him to see her do it. When she had finished the work, she slipped into the master bedroom and sat on the edge of her bed. Her eyes wandered to his bed, adjacent to her own. She hadn't had to make it in weeks. The sheets were crisp, tucked neatly under the mattress, and the comforter smooth. He slept in his study except when he came to her.

She tried not to think about that as she undressed. Her skirt fell quickly from her waist as she unbuttoned it. She hung it and her wool blazer on a hanger and then placed the suit in the closet next to a dozen nearly identical dress suits. It faded into the others, as muted and bulky as the rest. Karoline slipped her hand past the suits and drew a dress out, pushing the suits away to stare at it. It was canary yellow; she recalled the last time she had worn it. How long it had been since she had worn anything so bright! Anything that sung with life. Then she pushed it back into the depths of her wardrobe and shut the door.

****

"This is going to sting a little and then it will itch, like you're being tickled." The tailor's voice drew her back to the makeshift clinic. She appreciated him keeping her informed, but she closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see what he was doing.

"How did you find me anyway?" he asked. "Nice ladies like you don't usually know how to navigate the grey market."

She tried to speak, but the oxi-mask muffled her voice. He pushed it up. "That should be enough anyway."

"A woman from my neighborhood. She has connections." She let the word linger without going into details.

"What's her name?" he asked.

Karoline didn't like the way he was pressing her for more information. "I thought I could expect some anonymity."

"Sure, but I need to know my friends," he said.

"Her daughter is in my class. She had an older sister who always seemed a bit…off." Karoline thought this was a nice way to put it. The girl's sister had been strange, standoffish, but bright. Karoline had guessed she was keeping a secret. Not only because of the girl's oddities, but because her mother's face contorted with fear when Karoline mentioned testing during a parent conference.

"And this mother trusted you enough to just point you in the direction of the grey market?" He didn't believe her, but Karoline didn't care.

"Women are understanding about these things," she said.

"I suppose." He ignored her after that, turning his attention back to his work. Her belly prickled. The itch tickled, but she didn't want to laugh.

Tendrils of pain seared into her skin and lingered, bursting into raw flames when they crept too close together, until her torso was on fire. It was more intense than he had led her to believe. She wondered then how Meria had known where to send her. If she'd done this once, too. If she'd been one of the women who sought out the tailor for more sinister purposes.

But Meria had two children. Two fair-faced girls. She had no need of a tailor, and yet, Karoline had been correct in her suspicion. She wouldn't have had the courage to seek her out if it hadn't been for the telebound. She would have chanced anything, with anyone, after that.

****

She barely heard the girl's farewell as she was lost in her own thoughts. The telebound had come to her at lunchtime. She didn't need to open the sealed memo the secretary had delivered to her to know what it said.

"Mrs. Swander," the girl called again.
She blinked and met the girl's gaze.

"Yes, Amie?"

"Have a nice weekend," the girl said brightly. Karoline nodded and attempted a smile. She failed, but Amie bounced out of the room with her classmates without noticing. Karoline watched as the girl's fair curls disappeared from sight. Once she had been like that—bubbly and eager to earn the approval of her instructor. Karoline didn't delude herself into thinking the girl liked her. As with so many others her age, Amie probably believed instructor approval would gain her an advantage at the testing. But Karoline knew it didn't. She couldn't tell the girls that though.

She couldn't tell them that they weren't special and that none of them would escape the monotony of Romen, the well-oiled capitol of Arras's Western Sector. It wouldn't matter anyway. Every girl thought she was special until she was dismissed. Karoline felt a fleeting moment of satisfaction at the thought. It wouldn't be long before the girls understood the nature of monotony. The crippling oppression of sameness.

She stared at the telebound and then she crumbled it up and threw it in the recycle bin.

No one bothered to say hello as she exited the academy. She had few friends among the other instructors. Several of them were much older and it

was not easy to gain entrance into their exclusive gossip circle. The younger teachers spoke awkwardly when she visited the lounge, tiptoeing around stories of their infants and toddlers. She had stopped taking lunch there two years ago. Now she ate at her desk while the girls were in the cafeteria.

Outside the academy, elms, still green with summer leaves, yawned over her head, blowing slightly in the September breeze. Autumn would arrive soon and the world would turn yellow and then brown until it all withered and fell away. She hated that season. It made no sense to bother with it when the Guild could simply advise the Spinsters to keep Arras green and alive. But then, she reasoned under her breath, maybe that wasn't possible. She was proof that even the most invasive loom technology could not ensure perfect order.

****

"Have they tried other options?" the tailor asked. "I see evidence of scarring."

"Yes," Karoline said. Needles flashed through her mind. Cuffs that bound her to a cold, metal bed. But as aggressive as the fingers were that explored her, as many hours as she spent under the blinding light of the clinic's lamp, she'd not seen any results. The doctor's words flashed through her mind:

"You're young, but not as young as we would like to do more extensive patching. At this point, I need to get approval for further treatment."

He hadn't bothered to look up from his digifile.

"Well, they don't do things like this there. Not yet," the tailor murmured.

She felt something then. Agony clawed out of her and she gasped in pain, but he only reached up to pull the oxi-mask back over her face. His fingers left crimson on the plastic mask. She could see it just over her nose.

It occurred to her then that it was too late. She couldn't turn back from this now. She'd asked a man to alter her, and now her blood was on his hands.

It was the last thought that passed through her mind before the padlocked door to the clinic slammed open. Karoline's natural instinct, despite the calming gas, was to leap up, but when she tried, she felt

wrenching pain in her lower half. He wasn't done with the procedure, and her movement only yielded a glimpse at the tailor's macabre handiwork.

Guards filtered carefully into the room, and the tailor raised his hands. His eyes met hers and accusation pooled behind his widened irises. At first she didn't comprehend the look, but then understanding crept in. How could he think she had something to do with this? When she needed his help so badly?

"Deniel, you've got quite the mess here." The voice was smooth and colored with amusement.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll clean up," the tailor offered.

"No need."

The guards surrounded him then, cuffing his arms in fast, fluid movements.

"It would be easier to rip you, but frankly, we can use your skills," the official told Deniel.

"Like I'd work with you, Patton," Deniel said.

"I wasn't asking you."

Karoline tried to comprehend what was happening. She was caught. She'd be imprisoned, maybe even altered for deviance. Or worse. She felt hands on her then. They weren't the practiced fingers of the tailor. She struggled against the searing sensation pinning her at the waist to see medics patching her up. She wanted to cry out for them to stop. To let him finish. But the mask was over her mouth.

A face blurred to life above her, and she had to blink against the guards' bright handlights.

"Karoline Swander?"

She nodded.

"Is this your wife?" the official asked.

Karoline didn't turn to look for Max, but she heard his voice answer affirmatively.

"But I didn't know she was up to this, Ambassador Patton," he said.

“I’m sure you would never sanction something like this, Minister Swander,” the ambassador reassured him. “You do understand that I can’t overlook this deviance though?”

“Of course,” Max responded. He wasn’t going to question the orders of a superior, particularly those of Cormac Patton.

Karoline’s scream broke through the mask, startling several medics, but it only made Cormac laugh.

“Bit of a troublemaker.”

“I suppose,” Max said.

“You won’t have to worry about her anymore,” Cormac said. The two men watched as the medics moved her to a cot and carried her out of the hidden clinic. She never stopped screaming.

“But I’m a senior official, I’ll need a wife.”

“Oh that can be arranged,” Cormac assured him. “I’ll need you to go into the clinic. Fill out some paperwork. Get a few tests.”

“Can we—” Max hesitated “—keep this quiet?”

“I promise you won’t have to worry at all,” Cormac said.

Max released a long breath and smiled. Cormac nudged him gently toward the door, and he followed the medics into the transport.

Cormac stood for a long time alone in the cold cement room, surveying the makeshift surgery table and the spots of blood that still pooled there. Finally he cocked his head to activate his complant. “Hannox, the issue is resolved. The wife can be removed, but just rework the husband. Make sure he’s lost in his grief. No need to waste another healthy woman on him.”

Hannox’s voice vibrated his ear. “And the metro? Protocol One?”

“Unnecessary,” Cormac answered without hesitation. “This wasn’t the taint. The citizens of Romen need a lesson. Mrs. Swander’s accident will work nicely.”

“And if the other traitors aren’t identified?” Hannox asked.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Cormac said, climbing the steps out of the grim clinic. “You can’t hide in Arras for long.”

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CREWEL
A NOVEL

Prologue

THEY CAME IN THE NIGHT. Once, families fought them, neighbors coming to their aid. But now that peace has been established, and the looms proven, girls pray to be retrieved. They still come at night, but now it's to avoid the masses with eager hands. It's a blessing to touch a Spinster as she passes. That's what they tell us.

No one knows why some girls have the gift. There are theories, of course. That it's passed down genetically. Or that girls with an open mind can see the weave of life around them at all times. Even that it's a gift only given to the pure-hearted. But I know better. It's a curse.

I've trained at night with my parents ever since they realized I had the calling. They taught me clumsiness, making me fumble until it looked natural when I dropped a bowl or spilled the water jug. Then we practiced with time, my parents encouraging me to take the silky strands deftly into my fingers to twist and tangle them until they were warped and useless in my hands. This was harder than dropping and spilling. My fingers wanted to weave the delicate tendrils seamlessly with matter. By my sixteenth birthday, when it was time for the required testing, the ruse was so effective, the other girls whispered I would be sent away early.

Incapable.

Awkward.

Artless.

Maybe it was their taunts lodging in my back like tiny daggers that poisoned my resolve. Or perhaps it was the way the practice loom sang out, begging to be touched. But today, the last day of testing, I finally slipped—my fingers gracefully winding through the ebbing bands of time.

Tonight they'll come for me.

One

I CAN COUNT THE DAYS UNTIL SUMMER draws to a close and autumn seeps into the leaves, painting them ginger and scarlet. Right now, though, the dappled light of mid-afternoon is glorious emerald, and it's hot on my face. With sun soaking into me, everything is possible. When it is inevitably gone—the seasons programmed to begin and end with smooth precision—life will take its predetermined route. Like a machine. Like me.

It's quiet outside my sister's academy. I'm the only one waiting for the girls to be released. When I first began my testing cycle, Amie held her pinkie finger up and made me swear to meet her each day after I got out. It was a hard promise to make, knowing they could call me anytime and sweep me away to the Coventry's towers. But I make it, even today. A girl has to have something constant, has to know what to expect. The last bit of chocolate in the monthly rations; the tidy ending to a program on the Stream. I want my little sister to be able to count on a sweet life, even if the heat of summer tastes bitter now.

A bell tolls and girls pour out in a surge of plaid, their giggles and shouts breaking the perfect stillness of the scene. Amie, who's always had more friends than me, bounces out, surrounded by a handful of other girls in the awkward stages of early adolescence. I wave to her and she dashes toward me, catching my hand and pulling me in the direction of our house. Something about her eager greeting every afternoon makes it okay that I don't have many companions my age.

"Did you do it?" she asks in a breathless voice, skipping ahead of me.

I hesitate for a moment. If anyone will be happy about my mistake, it will be Amie. If I tell her the truth, she'll squeal and clap. She'll hug me, and maybe for a moment I can leach her happiness, fill myself up with it, and believe everything is going to turn out fine.

"No," I lie, and her face falls.

"It's okay," she says with a resolved nod. "At least this way you get to stay in Romen. With me."

I'd rather pretend she's right, to allow myself to get lost in the twelve-year-old's gossip, than face what's coming. I have my whole life to be a

Spinster, and only one more night to be her sister. I ooh and aah at the right times, and she believes I'm listening. I imagine that the attention builds her up and completes her, so that when I'm gone she'll have enough not to waste her life searching for it.

Amie's primary academy lets out at the same time as the metro's day shift, so Mom is waiting when we get home. She's in the kitchen and her head snaps up as we enter, her eyes rushing to meet mine. Taking a deep breath, I shake my head, and her shoulders slump in relief. I let her hug me as long as she wants, her embrace flooding me with love. That's why I don't tell them the truth. I want love—not excitement or worry—to be the lingering imprint they leave on me.

Mom reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from my face, but she doesn't smile. Although she thinks I failed at testing, she also knows my time here is almost up. She's thinking that I'll be assigned a role soon, and married shortly thereafter, even if I won't be taken away. What's the point of telling her she'll lose me tonight? It's not important now, and this moment is what matters.

It's an ordinary evening at our ordinary table, and apart from the overcooked pot roast—Mom's specialty and a rare treat—not much is different, not for my family at least. The grandfather clock ticks in our hall, cicadas perform their summer crescendo, a motopact rumbles down the street, and outside the sky fades into dusky twilight beckoning nightfall. It's a day just like the hundreds that came before it, but tonight I won't tiptoe from my bed to my parents' room. The end of testing also means the end of years of training.

I live with my family in a tiny bungalow outside Romen's metro where my parents have been assigned two children and an appropriately sized house. My mom told me they applied for another child when I was eight—before they discovered my condition—but upon evaluation they were denied. The cost to maintain each individual makes it necessary for the Guild to regulate population. She explained this matter-of-factly one morning as she pinned her hair up into elaborate curls before work. I had asked her for a brother. She waited until I was older to explain that it would have been impossible anyway, due to segregation, but I was still mortified. Pushing my rations around my plate, I realize how much easier it would be

if I had been a boy, or if my sister was a boy. I bet my parents wanted boys, too. Then they wouldn't have to worry about us being taken away.

"Adelice," my mother says quietly, "you aren't eating. Testing is over. I would think you'd have an appetite."

She's very good at projecting a calm demeanor, but I sometimes wonder if the carefully painted cosmetics layered until her face is silken with rouged cheeks and plump lips are a ruse to help her stay balanced. She makes it look effortless—the cosmetics, her perfectly pinned scarlet hair, and her secretary suit. She appears to be exactly what is expected of a woman: beautiful, groomed, obedient. I never knew there was another side to her until I was eleven, the year she and my father began training my fingers toward uselessness.

"I'm fine." My response is flat and unbelievable, and I wish I had a perfectly painted face to hide under. Girls are expected to remain pure and natural—in body and appearance—until they're officially released from testing. Purity standards ensure that girls with weaving abilities don't lose them by being promiscuous. Some of my classmates look as beautiful in this state as my mother—delicate and fair. I'm *too* pale. My skin is washed out against my strawberry hair. If only it was the brilliant fiery red of my mother's or soft gold like my sister, Amie's, but mine is as dull as dirty pennies.

"Your mother made a special dinner," my dad points out. His voice is kind, but the implication is clear: I'm wasting food. Staring at the potatoes and too-dry slices of roast beef, I feel guilty. This meal probably ate up two night's rations, and then there's the cake.

It's a large frosted cake from a bakery. My mom has made us small cakes for our birthdays, but nothing like this fancy white cake with sugar flowers and lacy lines of frosting. I know it cost half a week's rations. Most likely they'll resort to eating it for breakfast later in the week while they wait for their next disbursement. The frail white scallops edging the cake make my stomach turn. I'm not used to sweets, and I'm not hungry. As it is, I can barely bring myself to eat a few bites of the overcooked meat.

"This is exactly the cake I want for my birthday," Amie gushes. She's never had anything like a bakery cake before. When Amie came home from academy today and saw this one, my mom told her she could have one for her next birthday. It's a pretty big deal for a kid who's only had hand-me-

downs her whole life, but my mom obviously wants to soften her transition into training.

"It will have to be a bit smaller," Mom reminds her, "and you won't be having any of this one if you don't eat your dinner first."

I can't help smiling as Amie's eyes widen and she begins scooping food into her mouth, gulping it down hard. Mom calls her "an eater." I wish I could eat like her when I'm excited or tense or sad, but nerves kill my appetite, and the fact that this is the last dinner I'll ever share with my family has my stomach in knots.

"Did you get this for Adelice?" Amie asks between bites, revealing bits of chewed food.

"Close your mouth when you eat," my dad says, but I see the corner of his own curling up a bit.

"Yes, Adelice deserved something special today." My mother's voice is quiet, but as she speaks her face glows and a faint smile plays at her lips. "I thought we should celebrate."

"Marfa Crossix's sister came home from testing last week crying and hasn't left her room yet," Amie continues after swallowing the meat. "Marfa said it was like someone died. Everyone is so sad. Her parents are already setting up courtship appointments to cheer her up. She has an appointment with pretty much every boy with an active marriage profile in Romen."

Amie laughs, but the rest of the table falls silent. I'm studying the scallops in the icing, trying to make out the delicate pattern the baker used. Amie doesn't notice the quiet resistance of my parents to the Guild-approved curriculum and marriage laws, but they haven't exactly been honest with her either. I'm old enough to understand why they don't want me to become a Spinster, even if they've always been careful with what they say to me.

My father clears his throat and looks at my mother for support. "Some girls really want to go to the Coventry. Marfa's sister must be disappointed."

"I would be, too," Amie chirps, shoveling a forkful of potatoes into her mouth. "They showed us pictures at academy. Spinsters are so beautiful, and they have everything."

"I suppose," Mom murmurs, slicing small bites of meat with her knife in slow, precise strokes.

“I can’t wait for testing.” Amie sighs dreamily, and my mother frowns at her. Amie’s in too much of a daze to notice.

“Those girls are very privileged, but if Adelice was called, we would never see her again.” Mom’s response is careful. My parents have started trying to plant doubt in Amie’s head, although her tendency to rattle on to anyone listening makes it hard to talk to her about important stuff. But I don’t mind listening to Amie relate the dramas of every girl in her class or the programs she saw on the Stream. It’s my break before spending every night practicing and rehearsing what to say—and not to say. Curling up with my sister before she falls asleep is when I get my only sense of normal.

But a cake can’t buy more than a night’s happiness. My parents will have a long road ahead of them preparing Amie to fail at her testing. She’s never shown an ounce of weaving ability, but they’ll prepare her. I wonder if she’ll still be eager to go when it’s her turn in four years.

“Marfa says when she’s a Spinster she’ll always get her picture on the front of the *Bulletin* so her parents won’t worry. That’s what I’d do, too.” Her face is solemn as though she’s really thought this through.

Mom smiles but doesn’t respond. Amie fawns over the glitzy images in our daily bulletin like most pre-testing girls, but she doesn’t truly understand what Spinsters do. I mean, of course she understands that they maintain and embellish the fabric that makes up our world. Every girl learns that early in academy. But someday my parents will explain what Spinsters really do—that no matter how good their intentions, with absolute power comes corruption. And the Guild has absolute power over us and the Spinsters. But they also feed us and protect us. I listen to my parents, but I don’t really understand either. Can a life of providing food and safety for others be that bad? I only know that what’s about to happen to me is going to break their hearts, and once I’m gone, I’ll never have a chance to tell them I’m okay. I guess I’ll have to get my picture on the front of the *Bulletin* like Marfa Crossix.

The meal continues in silence, and everyone’s eyes gravitate toward our fluffy white centerpiece. The small oak dining table sits four perfectly; we can pass bowls and plates to one another, but tonight my mother served us because there’s room for nothing but the cake. I envy the gleeful sparkle in Amie’s eyes as she stares at it, probably imagining how it will taste or

building her grand thirteenth birthday cake in her head. My parents, on the other hand, sit in quiet relief: the closest to celebrating they can muster.

“I’m sorry you failed, Ad,” Amie says, looking up at me. Her eyes dart back to the cake, and I see the longing in them.

“Adelice didn’t fail,” my father tells her.

“But she wasn’t chosen.”

“We didn’t want her to be chosen,” my mother says.

“Did you want to be chosen, Ad?” Amie’s question is so earnest and innocent.

I barely shake my head.

“But why not?” Amie asks.

“Do you want that life?” Mom asks her quietly.

“Why are you so against the Spinsters? I don’t get why we’re celebrating.” Amie’s eyes stay focused on the cake. She’s never been so blunt before.

“We’re not against the Spinsterhood,” Mom responds in a rush.

“Or the Guild,” Dad adds.

“Or the Guild,” Mom echoes with a nod. “But if you pass testing, you can never return here.”

Here—the cramped two-bedroom house in the girls’ neighborhood, where I’ve been safe from the influence of boys my age. My home, with books stashed in hollowed cubbies behind panels in the walls, along with family heirlooms passed down for almost one hundred years from mother to daughter. I’ve always loved the radio in particular, even if it doesn’t work anymore. Mom says that it used to play music and stories and proclaimed the news, like the Stream does now but without the visuals. I asked once why we kept it if it was useless, and she told me that remembering the past is never useless.

“But a Spinster’s life is exciting,” Amie argues. “They have parties and beautiful dresses. Spinsters have control.”

Her last word hangs in the air, and my parents exchange a worried glance. Control? No one granting permission to have children. No predetermined cosmetic routines. No chosen roles. That would be true control.

“If you think they have control—” Mom begins quietly, but my father coughs.

“They have cake,” Amie says with a sigh, slumping against the table.

Dad takes one look at her pitiful face, throws his head back, and laughs. A moment later, my usually stoic mother joins in. Even I feel some giggles bubbling up my throat. Amie does her best to look sad, but her frown twitches until it turns into an impish grin.

"Your cosmetic tokens should arrive next week, Adelice," my mom says, turning back to me. "I'll show you how to apply everything."

"Arras knows, I better be able to apply cosmetics. Isn't that a girl's most important job?" The jibe is out of my mouth before I consider what I'm saying. I have a habit of cracking a joke when I'm nervous. But judging from the look of warning on my mom's face, I'm not being very funny.

"And I'll jump right on those courtship appointments," Dad says with a wink, breaking up the tension between Mom and me.

This actually makes me laugh, despite the numbing dread creeping through my limbs. My parents aren't as eager to get me married and out of the house as most girls' families are, even if I am required to be married by eighteen. But the joke can't elevate my mood for long. Right now the thought of getting married, an inevitability that was always too surreal to consider, is out of the question. Spinsters don't marry.

"And I get to help you choose your cosmetic colors at the co-op, right?" Amie reminds me. She's been studying catalogs and style sets since she could read. Mom doesn't take us to the metro co-op to shop often, because it's not segregated, and when she has it's been for home supplies, not something exciting like cosmetics.

"I hear they're increasing the number of teachers in the Corps on assignment day," Dad continues, serious again.

I've always wanted to be a teacher. Secretary, nurse, factory worker—none of the other designated female roles left any room for creativity. Even in a carefully controlled academy curriculum there is more room for expression in teaching than there is in typing notes for businessmen.

"Oh, Ad, you'd be a great teacher," Amie bursts in. "Whatever you do, don't get stuck in an office. We just finished our shorthand class, and it was so boring. Besides you have to food-gen coffee all day! Right, Mom?"

Amie looks to her for confirmation, and Mom gives her a quick nod. My sister's too oblivious to see the pain flash across her face, but I'm not.

"I do make a lot of coffee," Mom says.

My throat is raw from holding back tears, and if I speak…

“I’m sure you’ll get assigned to be a teacher,” Mom says, eager to change the subject, and then she pats my arm. I must look nervous. I try to imagine what I would be feeling now if assignment day was only a week away for me, but I can’t. I was supposed to go to testing for a month, to be dismissed, and then get assigned. It was the first time I’d been on a loom, one of the large automated machines that show us the fabric of Arras. It was the first time any of us Eligibles had even seen a loom. I only had to act as if I couldn’t see the weave, like the other girls, and answer the proctor’s questions with my practiced lies. If I hadn’t slipped, I would have been dismissed, and then assigned based on my strength assessments at academy. For years, I’d dutifully learned shorthand, home ec, and information storage. But now I’d never get the chance to use any of it.

“We need a new teacher.” Amie interrupts my thoughts. “Mrs. Swander left.”

“Is she expecting a baby?” my mother asks in a knowing way. Her eyes dull a bit as she speaks.

“No.” Amie shakes her head. “Principal Diffet said she had an accident.”

“An accident?” Dad repeats with a frown.

“Yep.” Amie nods, suddenly wide-eyed. “I’ve never known anyone who’s had an accident before.” Her voice is a mix of awe and solemnity. None of us know anyone who has had an accident, because accidents don’t happen in Arras.

“Did Principal Diffet say what happened?” Mom asks so softly that I barely hear her in the quiet dining room.

“No, but he told us not to worry because accidents are very rare and the Guild will be especially careful and investigate and stuff. Is she okay?” she asks, her voice conveying implicit trust. Whatever my father replies, she’ll believe it. I long to fall back in time and feel the comfort of knowing my parents have every answer, knowing I am safe.

My father forces a tight-lipped smile and nods at her. Mom’s eyes meet mine.

“Do you think it’s odd?” She leans into Dad, so Amie won’t hear. It doesn’t matter because Amie has returned to worshipping the cake.

“An accident? Of course.”

“No.” Mom shakes her head. “That the principal told them.”

“It must have been bad,” he whispers.

“Something Manipulation Services couldn’t cover up?”

“We haven’t heard anything at the station.”

“None of the girls said anything today.”

I wish I had some intelligence to share, because I’m feeling excluded. Outside the dining room night has engulfed our quiet street. I can see the shadowed outline of the oak tree in our yard but little else. It won’t be long now, and we’re wasting time worrying about Mrs. Swander’s accident.

“We should eat the cake!” The suggestion bursts from me. My mother, momentarily startled, does a quick inventory of our plates and agrees.

Dad cuts into the cake with an old bread knife, smearing frosting across the blade and blending the vibrant red flowers into dull pink globs. Amie props her body against the table, completely absorbed in the ceremony, while Mom collects the pieces from Dad and passes them around. I’m bringing the first bite to my mouth when Mom stops me.

“Adelice, may your path be blessed. We’re proud of you.” There’s a break in her voice, and I know how much this moment means to her. She’s waited my whole life for this night: my release from testing. I can barely meet her eyes, and she motions for us to eat as she wipes a stray tear from her cheek, leaving a smudge of charcoal from her running mascara.

I take a bite and mash it against the roof of my mouth. The frosting is so sweet that it catches in my throat and makes my nose tingle. I have to wash it down with half a glass of water. Next to me Amie is devouring her piece, but my mother doesn’t tell her to slow down. Now that I’m through testing, it’s Amie’s turn. Tomorrow my parents plan to begin preparing her for her own testing.

“Girls—” my mother begins, but I’ll never know what she was going to say.

There’s a hammering at the door and the sound of many, many boots on our porch. I drop my fork and feel the blood rush out of my face and pool in my feet, weighting me to my chair.

“Adelice,” my father breathes, but he doesn’t ask, because he already knows.

“There isn’t time, Benn!” my mother shrieks, her perfectly applied foundation cracking, but just as quickly she regains control and grabs Amie’s arm.

A low hum fills the air and suddenly a voice booms through the room: “Adelice Lewys has been called to serve the Guild of Twelve. Blessings on

the Spinsters and Arras!”

Our neighbors will be outside soon; no one in Romen would willingly miss a retrieval. There’s nowhere to escape. Everyone here knows me. I rise to my feet to open the door for the retrieval squad, but my father pushes me toward the stairs.

“Daddy!” There’s fear in Amie’s voice.

I grope forward and find her hand, squeezing it tight. I stumble down behind her as my father herds us to the basement. I have no idea what his plan is. The only thing down here is a dank, meagerly stocked root cellar. Mom rushes to the basement wall and a moment later she slides a stack of bricks out of place to reveal a narrow tunnel.

Amie and I stand and watch; her wide-eyed horror mirrors the paralyzing fear I feel. The scene before us shifts and blurs. I can’t wrap my head around what they’re doing even as I see it happening. The only constant—the one real thing in this moment—is Amie’s fragile hand clutching my own. I hold on to it for life, hers and mine. It anchors me, and when my mother wrenches her away, I shriek, sure I’ll vanish into nothing.

“Ad,” Amie cries, stretching out to me through Mom’s arms.

It’s her fear that spurs me back to this moment, and I call out to her, “It’s okay, Ames. Go with Mommy.”

My mother’s hands falter for a moment when I say this. I can’t remember when I last called her Mommy. I’ve been too old and too busy for as long as I can remember. Tears that have been building up wash down her face, and she drops her hold on Amie. My sister jumps into my arms, and I inhale the scent of her soap-clean hair, aware of how fast her small heart beats against my belly. Mom circles us and I soak up the strength of her warm arms. But it’s over too quickly, and with a kiss on my forehead, they’re gone.

“Adelice, here!” My father shoves me toward another hole as Amie and Mom disappear into the passage, but before I enter he grabs my wrist and presses cold metal near my vein. A second later heat sears the tender skin. When he releases my arm, I draw the spot up to my mouth, trying to blow off the burning.

“What…” I search his face for a reason for the techprint, and looking back down, I see the pale shape of a flowing hourglass marking the spot. It’s barely visible on my fair skin.

“I should have done it a long time ago, but…” He shakes off the emotion creeping into his voice and sets his jaw. “It will help you remember who you are. You have to leave now, honey.”

I look into the tunnel that stretches into nothing. “Where does it go?” I can’t keep the panic out of my voice. There’s nowhere to hide in Arras, and this is treason.

Above us a stampede of heavy boots breaks across the wooden floor.

“Go,” he pleads.

They’re in the dining room.

“There’s food on the table! They can’t be far.”

“Search the rest of the house and cordon off the street.”

The feet are in the kitchen now.

“Dad…” I throw my arms around him, unsure if he will follow me or go into another tunnel.

“I knew we could never hide how special you are,” he murmurs against my hair. The basement door bangs open.

But before I can say I’m sorry for failing them, or tell him I love him, the boots are on the stairs. I scramble into the hole. He restacks the bricks behind me, shutting out the light. My chest constricts in the darkness. And then he stops. A large crack of light still streams in to the tunnel from the basement. I can’t move.

The bricks crash onto the concrete floor and light floods back into the tunnel. Choking down the scream fighting to loose itself, I struggle forward in the dirt, away from the growing light. I must keep moving forward. I try to forget Dad, and Mom and Amie in the other tunnel, as I crawl through the cold soil.

Keep moving forward.

I repeat it over and over, afraid that if I stop I will be paralyzed again. But somehow I do keep moving forward, farther and farther into darkness, until cold steel clamps down on my leg. I scream as it digs into my skin and begins drawing me back—back to the light and the men in boots, back to the Guild. I tear against the packed dirt of the tunnel, but the claw is stronger and each desperate lunge I make back toward the darkness drives the metal deeper into my calf.

There is no fighting them.

Two

As they pull me from the escape tunnel, someone jabs a needle in my wounded leg. I thrash as the liquid burns through my calf, but suddenly I'm calm. When one of the officers helps me stand in the damp basement, I smile at him. I can't remember being happier.

"Patch that up," barks a tall official coming down the basement stairs. He's not like the others, who are dressed in typical soldier regalia. He is older and very handsome. His jaw is too smoothly sculpted to be natural, but the slight gray peppering his styled hair gives away his age. His nose, eyes, and teeth are too perfect, and I bet he's been taking advantage of renewal patches. He has the kind of face they put on the Stream to read the news. I blink dreamily at him as a medic begins cleaning the wound from the claw. A group of women scurry down behind the official and begin wiping my face and combing my hair. It feels so nice I want to fall asleep. The only thing keeping me awake is the cold, gritty concrete under my bare feet. I've lost my shoes in the struggle.

"You gave her too much," the official grumbles. "I said get her Stream-ready, not dose her out of her mind."

"I'm sorry. She was really fighting us," one of the officers tells him. I can hear the grin in his voice.

"Fix it."

A moment later another needle pricks my arm, and I stop smiling. I'm still calm, but the euphoria is fading.

"Adelice Lewys?" the official asks, and I nod. "Do you understand what's going on?"

I try to say yes but nothing comes out, so I bob my head once more.

"There's a Stream crew upstairs and most of your neighborhood. I'd prefer we didn't have to drag you off looking like a loose thread, but if you try that again I'll have him dose you. Do you understand what I'm saying?" He points to the medic who has finished healing my wound.

I manage to squeak, "Yes."

"Good girl. We'll deal with this later," he says, gesturing to the escape tunnel. "Your job is to smile and look thrilled to be selected. Can you do

that?”

I stare at him.

The official sighs and cocks his head to activate the microscopic complant embedded over his left ear. The device automatically connects you to any other complant user or wall-communication panel. I’ve seen men in the metro chatting on them, but my father’s role as a mechanic doesn’t warrant the privilege of having one implanted. A moment later I’m privy to the man’s one-sided conversation.

“Hannox, do you have them? No, hold her.” Turning back to me, he points to the hole my mother and Amie disappeared through. “Let’s pretend my colleague has someone you love very much in his custody, and your performance for the Stream crew decides whether she lives or dies. Can you look thrilled now?”

I muster up the brightest smile I can and flash it at him.

“Not bad, Adelice.” But then he frowns and pushes away the grooming crew. “Are you idiots? This is a retrieval. She can’t wear cosmetics!”

I look away as he continues to berate the aestheticians, and search for signs of my father. He’s nowhere, but as my eyes scan the wall I can’t make out any other cracks that could hide a passage. Of course, until twenty minutes ago I hadn’t known about even the first two passages.

“Are we clear?” the official asks the medic.

“Give her one more minute.”

“I’m fine,” I say with a smile, practicing for the Stream crew. But as soon as I speak, my stomach contracts hard and sends my dinner back up my throat. I double over and retch up pot roast and frothy cream.

“Fantastic,” the official bellows. “Can’t I even get a competent squad?”

“She’ll be fine now,” the medic says, backing up a few steps.

The official glowers at him and then turns and leads me to the stairs. At the last step, he grabs my arm and leans in close. “Make it look real. Her life depends on it.”

I don’t have the guts to ask him if he means my mother or my sister; his answer will only tell me who is dead. I stagger up the stairs and blink hard against the bright lights of the main floor. Every lamp is on and the kitchen and dining room have been ransacked. As we march through the dining room on our way to the front door, I slip on something dark and sticky. One of the officers catches my arm as I stumble, and I snap my head down to the spot on the floor. It’s nearly black and pools out from a large, stiff bag.

I crumble back against the man behind me.

“No time for that now, sweetheart,” he hisses. “You’ve got a show to put on or we’re going to need more of those bags.”

I can’t tear my eyes from the bag, so he leads me away. I try to tell him there’s blood on my feet, but he’s already barking more orders at his squad.

“Halt,” commands a guard at the door.

The official steps forward, runs his eyes over me, sighs, and steps out onto the porch to thunderous applause. I turn away and focus on the long black bag, but a guard moves over to the table, blocking my view. I glance over to see he’s eating the cake.

“Hey,” I call, and everyone looks at me in surprise. “That’s half a week’s rations! Leave it for my family.”

The officer’s eyes dart to his companion, and I see it on their faces—pity—but he sets down the cake.

“Blessings, Romen! I’m Cormac Patton and…” The rude official addresses the crowd from my porch. More applause. He waits a moment for it to calm down.

“He always has time for applause,” an aesthetician notes dryly.

“Blessings, Arras. I’m Cormac Patton,” her companion mimics him in a low voice, and they laugh until a guard shushes them.

Cormac Patton. Coventry Ambassador for the Guild of Twelve and the Stream’s number one pretty boy. How could I have not recognized him? They must have really drugged me. Or maybe I’m not used to celebrities hanging out in my basement. Even my mom has a thing for him. But I don’t see the appeal. Sure, he’s perpetually clad in a black, double-breasted tuxedo, and very handsome, but he has to be at least forty. Or maybe even older, since I can’t remember a time in my life when he looked anything but forty.

I can’t comprehend that he’s standing on my porch right now.

“We are privileged to call to service Adelice Lewys,” Cormac’s voice bellows. An officer pushes me out next to him. “May Arras flourish at her touch.”

The crowd echoes back the blessing and color floods my cheeks. I paste the bright smile on my face and will it to stick.

“Wave,” Cormac instructs me through gritted teeth, his own smile undiminished as he gives the command.

I wave shyly and keep beaming at the crowd. A moment later, officers surround and flank us, escorting us to a waiting motocarriage. The crowd swarms into a mob and all I see are hands. The officers hold most of them back, and I shrink away from the mob. Everywhere I look, fingers claw at me, grabbing for a bit of my skirt or a caress of my hair. I'm breathing faster, and beside me Cormac frowns. The drugs must not be as strong as he thought. I think of his threat and force myself to look excited.

The motocarriage is longer than any of the motopacts I've seen in Romen. I've seen ones like this on the Stream. Motopacts are daily cars to drive into the metro, but motocarriages like this have chauffeurs. I fix my eyes on it; I only have to make it that far and then this public charade will be over. An officer ushers me to the rear side door and helps me in. As the door shuts me safely away from the cheering crowd, I scowl.

"That's much more attractive," Cormac mutters as he slides in next to me. "At least you're the last retrieval."

"Had a long day?" I ask harshly.

"No, but I can't imagine dragging your deadweight around much longer," he snaps back as he pours himself a glass of amber liquid. He doesn't bother to offer me any.

I lapse into silence. Deadweight. The image of the body bag lying casually on my dining room floor floats into my head and hot tears prick my eyes, threatening to spill over.

I stare out the window so he won't see me cry. The glass is tinted and the crowd can no longer watch us, but they're still milling around. Neighbors talk animatedly, pointing to our house. Several heads incline, relaying the news to people far away on their complants. We haven't had a retrieval in Romen in ten years. Tomorrow I'll be on Romen's morning Stream. I wonder what they'll say about my parents. My sister.

Cormac is downing the last drops of his cocktail when his head cocks to the side to take a call. "Here," he grunts. He's quiet but soon disinterest turns to mild annoyance.

"Clean it," he says. "No, clean all of it."

His head shifts back down, disconnecting from the call, and he looks at me. "Lucky girl."

I shrug, not willing to betray my feelings at the moment. I'm not sure what cleaning is, and from the way he growled the order, I'm not sure I want to know.

“Oh, you have no idea,” he says. “How’s your leg?”

I glance down to the gashes the claw left and find they’re gone.

“Fine, I guess.” I try to keep the surprise out of my voice but can’t.

“Renewal patch,” he informs me. “One of the many perks you’ll have as a Spinster.”

I don’t respond, and he returns to the crystal bottle for another drink. My eyes wander back to the window. We’re nearly out of Romen, and it’s hard to believe I’ll never come back here. The view grows hazy and my eyelids droop; the drugs they administered earlier are making me sleepy. But right before my eyes close, the street disappears behind us, shimmering and fading into nothing.

An officer shakes me awake when we get to Nilus Station and hands me a pair of shoes. Another escorts me to the toilet and stands guard. Afterward, I’m taken to a small private powder room and given a simple white shift to change into. They take away everything I was wearing before. I dress as slowly as possible, trying to sift through the fog in my head.

I can’t put off going out into the station for long. Nilus Station is situated in the capital of the Western Sector and it re-bounds travelers to the other three capital cities in Arras. It’s also strictly policed. Only the most important businessmen can travel between the four sectors; someone like my dad wouldn’t qualify. I’ve never been out of Romen’s city limits before today. I should be excited, but all I feel is a dull twinge at the thought. Cormac is lounging in a turquoise chair outside the powder room.

“Ever been to a rebound station, Adelice?” Cormac asks conversationally as he stands to greet me when I step back into the station lobby.

I shake my head. I’m not eager to act like we’re friends.

“Didn’t think so. It’s pretty rare these days for some citizens to get border passes.” He smiles, and for the first time I notice a crease in his flawless skin. By “some citizens” he means women and service workers.

Cormac sets the pace, and I stroll with him along the periphery of the station. There’s a small booth offering shoe shines, a coat-check stand, and a little café. He gestures for me to follow him into the restaurant, and we’re led up to the second-floor mezzanine by a waiter. From here we can watch the travelers waiting for their rebound appointments in the great marble hall. Even though it’s busy, the sounds of travel—shoes clicking, complant

conversations, rustling *Bulletin*s—fill the space and bounce back across it. The roar of energy is nearly deafening.

"Miss, I'll need to see your privilege card," the waiter says, sneering at me.

I glance down at my simple dress and realize I don't even have my citizen ID with me, but Cormac speaks before I can make excuses.

"She's my guest. Do you need to see my PC?" It's more a challenge than a question.

The waiter glances at him and the haughty smile evaporates. "Ambassador Patton, I apologize. I didn't recognize you. I only saw the girl."

Something about the way he says *the girl* makes me feel dirty.

"No need to apologize. You don't get many girls in here, I imagine." He laughs, and the waiter joins him.

"We weren't informed there would be a retrieval squad traveling through, or we would have been prepared," the young man assures him.

"It was a last-minute retrieval, so the usual call-aheads weren't possible."

"So she's a…" He eyes me admiringly.

"She is an Eligible. Treat her as you would a Spinster." There's an edge of warning to Cormac's voice, and the young man nods solemnly.

He waits on me hand and foot, although I'm not allowed to order for myself. And as if a hovering waiter isn't annoying enough, every man in the place stares at me. It's the shameless gaze of the patrons that provokes a startling realization. Glancing back at the bustling travelers, I see the outline of suits and fedoras. The only other woman in the station takes coats at the stand I noticed earlier. Apparently only men are allowed to eat here. I knew rebounding was reserved for important businessmen, but I never realized that even the station was segregated. I rub my hands on the hem of my shift, aware of how warm it is here.

"Lecherous lot," Cormac says, and chuckles. "Actually, you don't see many women out from behind the desk these days. Not without their husbands."

It takes a minute for me to realize he means me. I'm the woman out and about.

"I'd suggest eating. I know you can't have much left in you after that stupid medic screwed up. You would think they would know how much

juice to give a 115-pound girl, and yet it's always too much or too little. You're lucky though—the Nilus Station has a great café." He tips his head back toward the kitchen door. "It might be a while before you eat again."

"I'm not very hungry," I say. My lamb chop sits untouched on the plate in front of me. Cormac's meal is similarly neglected, for all his advice to eat, but only because he's nursing a bourbon.

Cormac leans against the table and looks at me. "I figured as much. Take my advice, though, and eat something."

I think of the dining room table and white cake sitting on it, the puddle of black blood under its legs, and shake my head. The only thing I'm hungry for is answers.

"Eat, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

I take a couple of bites, knowing I won't be able to eat if he answers me first anyway, but as soon as I swallow, I turn my attention back to him. "Are they dead?" The words come out flat, and in that moment I know I've lost hope.

"Your father is," Cormac admits in a low voice. There's no remorse in his face. It's a fact.

I look down and take a deep breath. "And my mother and sister?"

"Your sister is in custody, but I have no news on your mother."

"Then she got away?" I ask breathlessly, wondering how they managed to catch Amie. Despite the news about my father, I feel a tug of hope.

"She got away for now. You'll be more upset later when the Valpron wears off."

"Maybe I'm stronger than you think," I challenge, although I'm all too aware of the numbness throughout my body.

"That would be a surprise. Valpron is a calming agent." Cormac's eyes narrow, and he sets down his fork. "What was your plan anyway?"

"Plan?"

"Don't be stupid, Adelice," he snarls. "They found four tunnels under your house that lead to places around your neighborhood. Where were you going to go?"

"I have no idea. I didn't know about them." It's the truth. I'm not sure I could lie right now if I wanted to, but I'd never guessed exactly how far my parents were willing to go to keep me from the Guild. How long ago had they dug those four tunnels, and how had they gotten away with it? From

the way Cormac is staring at me, I'm sure he believes I know more than I'm telling.

Cormac snorts, but resumes eating. Or rather, drinking. "Sure you didn't. Just like you didn't try to fail at the testing."

My eyes snap up to his, and I wonder how much he knows about this, but I don't say anything else.

"I've seen the surveillance Stream on your testing. The moment you wove was an accident," he continues.

"I had no idea what I was doing," I say, and in truth, I didn't. I'd never used a loom to weave before and something about seeing the fabric of life—the very raw materials that composed the space around me—laid out before me, rattled me. We'd been measured and questioned, and had practiced basic tasks like weaving actual fabric, but none of my classmates had much success with it. It took a certain talent they didn't seem to possess, and I'd spent my whole childhood learning to ignore mine.

"I doubt that," Cormac says, setting down his glass. "I know it was an accident because the loom wasn't on. A girl who can weave through time without a loom is a rare thing. It takes a very special girl to do that. We almost retrieved you right there."

I want to sink under the table. I knew I'd given myself away, but not how much I'd revealed. This is my fault.

"Fine. Don't say anything. There's no way your mother got out," he tells me coldly. "We had to clean the area after the Stream crew left."

"Clean?" I think back to the complant conversation I overheard in the motocarriage. It was short and he was mad, but the rest is lost in a haze. As I sift back further, the evening comes in bursts of images. Eating with my family. A white cake. Cold, dark dirt.

"I love how innocent you are. It's really just…delightful." He smirks, and this time I see tiny crinkles around his eyes. "The section has been cleaned and rewoven. No use trying to explain why a whole family went missing, especially not with the recent accident."

"My sister's teacher," I murmur.

"Mrs. Swander," he confirms. "What a mess, but not significant enough to justify a full cleaning."

I try to wrap my mind around what he's saying. The Guild transports food, assigns roles and houses, and oversees the addition of new babies to the population. But Arras hasn't had an accident or crime in years. At least

not that I know of. “Wait, are you saying you removed the memories of all the people in Romen?”

“Not exactly,” he says, downing the last of his bourbon. “We adjusted them a bit. When people try to remember your family, it will be a bit blurry. Your history now indicates you were an only child and your parents have been given clearance to move closer to the Coventry—that’s if anyone bothers to check up on you, but they won’t.”

“You made it all disappear,” I whisper.

“It’s easy to adjust at night thanks to the curfew,” he says, taking a bite of steak. “I’m sure it sounds horrible to you, but there’s no need to cause massive panic.”

“You mean”—I lean in and keep my voice low—“there’s no need to let people know you murdered their neighbors.”

The wicked grin fades from his face. “Someday you’ll understand, Adelice, that everything I do ensures people are safe. Cleaning a whole town isn’t something I take lightly, and it’s not easy. Most Spinsters don’t have the talent for it. You’d be wise to remember you’re the reason I had to order it.”

“I thought Arras didn’t have to worry about safety. Isn’t that why you need girls like me?” I challenge, gripping the butter knife next to my plate.

“Like I said, your ignorance is truly delightful.” But he doesn’t seem amused anymore. Instead his black eyes blaze with repressed fury. “Spinsters do ensure safety, by following my orders. It’s not all parties and loom work. The Guild demands loyalty. Never forget that.”

I can hear the warning in his voice not to push this further, so I relax my hand and the knife clatters back to the table.

“I hope you had enough to eat,” he snaps, rising from his seat. Apparently two bites of food is enough to appease him.

I follow. I don’t have any other choice.

A girl from our neighborhood was labeled a deviant a few years back. It’s a very rare thing, since everyone in Arras lives by zero-tolerance policy for misbehavior. But my dad told me that occasionally a child is brought up on charges and taken away. He said sometimes they come back, but most don’t. The little girl came back, but she was always in a daze, never quite in the moment with the rest of us. That’s how my neighbors will be when they think of me. It’s as though I don’t exist, and even the meds still coursing

through my body can’t block the tingle of pain that runs down to my fingertips when I think of it.

The meal was a courtesy it turns out, because we don’t have rebound appointments. We don’t need them. I’m torn between feeling guilty that he was being nice to me and wondering what his motives were. I trail Cormac as he strides past the line of men waiting on deck for their scheduled departures. A few grumble as we pass but the others shush them.

“I need to bump two spots,” Cormac tells the man at the counter, flashing him his PC.

I have no doubt this man knows who he is, but he takes the card and studies it for a moment before keying in a code on the companel, a communications system built into the wall behind him. A moment later, a young woman dressed in a snug sky-blue suit steps out from the corridor behind the desk and leads us past the counter.

“Ambassador Patton, will you require a refreshment while you rebound?” She’s all bubbles and pink lipstick.

“I ate. Thank you,” he tells her with a wink.

She doesn’t ask me.

Cormac’s rebound compartment is before my own, and I half expect him to disappear through the door without another word to me, but he turns and sizes me up one last time. “Adelice, I suggest you get some rest during your rebound.”

I keep my eyes focused on the end of the corridor. He’s acting like my dad. Telling me when to eat, when to sleep. But he’s the reason I need a surrogate father in the first place.

“You know you don’t deserve the way they’re going to treat you.” His voice sounds concerned but the Valpron must be wearing off, because I can barely keep myself from spitting at him. I don’t need his kindness.

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into,” he says, reading my face. He sighs and opens the chamber door. “I hope you learn to listen before it’s too late.”

I don’t bother to respond. I don’t want his arrogant advice. I watch him fixedly until the door shuts behind him. My guide shepherds me to the next compartment and follows me in.

“This is the first time you’ve rebounded,” she says matter-of-factly as she ushers me to a single chair on a small platform in the center of the room. “You’re likely to experience some nausea or vomiting.”

I sit down awkwardly and take in the sparse room.

“Here.” She reaches around me and buckles a strap against my waist.

“What’s that for?”

“We need to keep your movement confined to a minimal space during the rebounding process. Usually you can read or eat or drink,” she tells me, unfolding a small tray from the arm of the chair. “But no getting up.”

I glance down at the straps and raise an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry.” She lifts her heavily lined eyes, and I can see she means it. “I’m not authorized to give you anything.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a shrug. “I get the impression girls are rare around here.”

The girl adjusts my straps and checks the buckle before she steps back. She hesitates and checks the countdown on the wall: I have two minutes until the rebound will begin.

“That’s it though.” She pauses and glances around the room. “I probably should shut up.”

“What?” The medication is definitely wearing off, because now I’m holding back panic.

“Yes, women very rarely rebound, only Spinsters and Ministers’ wives. But they are given anything they want,” she whispers.

“I don’t understand,” I admit slowly.

She leans forward and pretends to adjust the tray. “They come in dressed up and we are supposed to give them bulletins and fashion catalogs to peruse. But you…”

I stare at her, trying to get what she’s telling me.

“My directions were to keep you buckled and locked down.”

“Locked down?”

“Yes.” She sighs and gives me a sympathetic pat. “I’m sorry.”

She reaches behind my back, and a second later, a large helmet woven of thick steel chains clamps down over my head. I cry out, but the sound is muffled. She squeezes my hand once, and I calm a little. Then more metal locks down, binding my wrists.

“Your rebound will only take an hour,” she reassures me, although I can barely hear her through the twisted metal. “Good luck, Adelice.”

I wish I’d asked her name.

The helmet blocks most of the room around me, but I can see through the gaps. It’s an inconsequential room with bare white walls, except for the

clock counting down in the corner.

The nausea hits first. The floor drops from under me and my stomach turns over, but I don't fall. The helmet keeps my head perfectly straight and my neck stretched, so I don't throw up, but I want to. Closing my eyes, I breathe evenly, trying to keep the sickness at bay. When I open them and peer through the steel wires, the room around me is gone, and I'm surrounded by a shimmering array of lights. The sight calms me and I focus on studying the gleaming strands that comprise the rebound compartment. Glowing beams twist across the room and then long threads of gray knit up through them, crisscrossing over the light into a luminous fabric of gold and silver. Somewhere a girl sits, replacing the weave of the rebound chamber with that of a chamber in a coventry, effectively moving me from one location to the other. I'm traveling hundreds of miles without moving a muscle. It's a delicate procedure, which is why it's reserved for the most important people in Arras. The Stream ran a special story vlip about the process a few years ago.

Gradually the light disappears and slowly—too slowly—gray walls form in patches around me, and the radiant canvas of the rebound process fades into a concrete room. It takes an eternity before the beams are gone, but when the last flickers into wall, I'm happy to feel the helmet being lifted from my head.

A group of solemnly clad officers surrounds me. The one who removed the helmet hesitates at the cuffs on my arms. They ache from being shackled during the trip, and I'm about to tell him so when a young blond in an expensive suit steps forward and holds his hand up. His head is cocked to the side, and I realize he's on his complant. Despite his obvious youth, he seems to be in charge. He's the kind of boy my classmates would zero in on in the daily *Bulletin* and giggle over as they passed his image around. But even this close to him, I only feel curiosity.

"Sedate her."

"Sir?" the officer asks in surprise.

"She wants her sedated," the blond boy orders. "You want to ask her why?"

The officer shakes his head, but as a medic rushes forward with a syringe I can see the apology in the boy's blindingly blue eyes.

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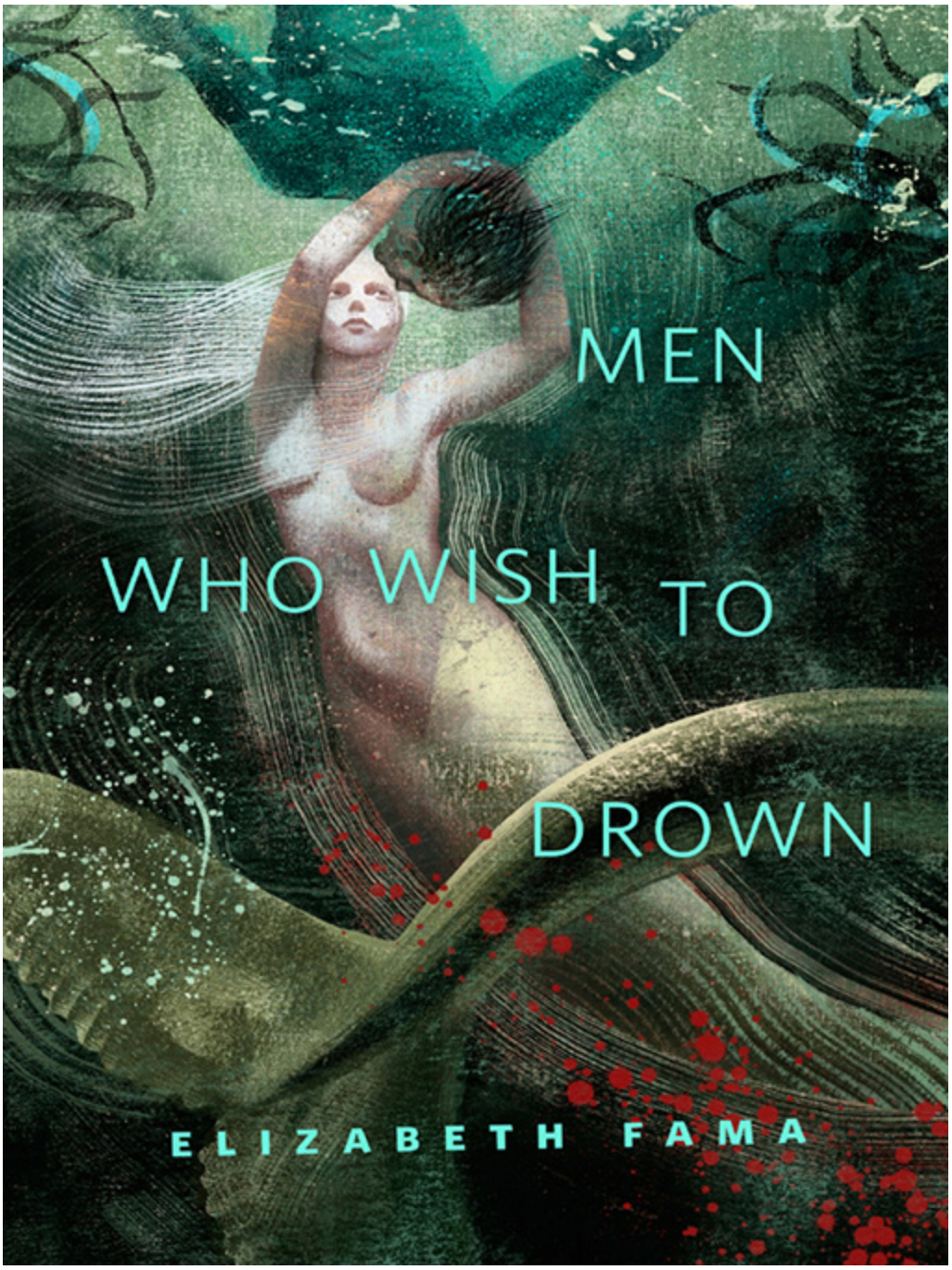
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WHO WISH TO
DROWN
ELIZABETH FAMA

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ELIZABETH FAMA

Men Who Wish to Drown

illustration by

ANNA & ELENA BALBUSSO

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Cited as the only extant firsthand record of a mermaid encounter in New England waters, this deathbed letter from a great-grandfather to his great-grandson is more likely an instructive fiction—a parable of regret. Supposedly corroborating the mermaid story, a ship's log (in the collection of the Provincetown Historical Museum) of the schooner *Hannah*, which plucked Mr. Stanton from South Weepecket in 1788, indicates that the crew saw two figures on the island prior to the rescue, but failed to locate a second victim. However, regarding accuracy and reliability, this is the same crew under Captain John Merriweather that reported sightings of a ghost ship and not one, but two sea monsters. ~~James S. Rucker, Archivist, Family Collections, Falmouth Historical Society, 1924

A Letter dictated to Mr. James Billington
by Mr. Resolved Henry Stanton
Six July, Eighteen-Hundred-Seventy-Two
Provincetown, Massachusetts

My dear great-grandson,

May I present Mr. Billington, my legal counsel and sometimes vexed friend, delivering to you my Last Will and Testament, an event which you may assume indicates, praise the Lord, that the bout of Lung Fever I acquired in the dead of night on the South Shore has finally released my soul. With this missive I hope to bequeath to you something more valuable than your portion of my estate: the wisdom to seize joy when it unexpectedly presents itself, and to hold it tight in the face of your own rationality. Had I only been warned when I was nineteen…Well, in truth, you would not have been born and I would have been much longer dead, but do not allow these inconveniences to detract from the moral.

I have grown fond of you this last year, dear Thomas—even in spite of seeing so much of myself in you. Yes, I was a young man once, though it is

impossible to imagine it now, in my one-hundred-third summer. I was tall and slim and cut a reasonably handsome figure.

As long as you have known me, I have been Grandfather Henry. But when I met my wife, Martha, I was still Resolved, a name that since our wedding day I have only signed to legal documents. No man was permitted to call me Resolved, because none could accuse me of any such virtue. My mother, God rest her soul, would have done better to name me Weakness on her deathbed. Or Safety. No, I think perhaps Regret. Yes, Regret Henry Stanton. It suits me.

I have led a life that most men envy. I achieved health and wealth almost without effort. But as a young man the future was unknown and there were two paths before me. In my nineteenth year I tasted the nectar of truly living, and I might have leapt over the chasm of the ordinary into the ravishment of an ecstatic extraordinary, but I turned away from it.

As difficult as it is for you to imagine me as a young man, how much harder it must be to conjure the babe. I lost my mother to childbed fever, and I myself was ill and puny. My father, a man of only twenty, despairing at his loss, had little interest in a wrinkled rat pup that cared not enough for its own survival to breathe and eat. I was given to my aunt, the childless wife of a whaler here in Provincetown who, through her considerable Dutch persistence, managed to force upon me what I would not take of my own volition. She made the braver choice for me, willed me into being.

I will not recount my many instances of weakness except to say that at every turn I have chosen the safer, narrower path; I have planted potatoes instead of wild roses; I have drunk water instead of wine. I was a milksop foster son to my uncle, a failure at every chore he assigned me, and a too-brooding poet in the eyes of my aunt.

Mr. Billington must maintain a stout heart for the remainder of this letter, and bite his tongue. I recounted to him my secret once before in a moment of despondency, and he labored hard to convince me that it was not as I recall—that I was ill. But I assure you: I was of sound mind when I met her, and a fool to let her go.

In my nineteenth year my uncle took me aboard the sloop *Leah Bonney* to attempt to train me on what the whalers called a Plum-Pudding Voyage: a short, between-seasons adventure to the Nantucket Shoals to take Right Whales. It was a far less perilous voyage than a deep-sea expedition, and meant as a gentle introduction. As chance would have it, we encountered a

Sperm Whale, an opportunity which the captain could not ignore. In those days there were no cannon-fired harpoons; the men threw them by hand, with drogues attached to the lines to exhaust the beast, which was brutally lanced when at long last it came within close range, until it bled out. It is a seemingly eternal death, and strangely intimate; there is no escape from the horror, for the hunter or the pursued. The whale regards you with its great eye as you shred its lungs with your weapons. This bull battled for two days.

It was the first time I had seen the practice, and I was already two weeks at sea—green, unsteady on my feet, my gut roiling. Being nauseated for a fortnight, eyeballs spinning without relent, would make a less miserable man wish for death, and as I heaved yellow bile into the waves, the ocean called to me. It would be the simplest thing to slip in during the commotion, with the crew so distracted, I thought. I was already leaning over the rail. The ship was listing. I was on the low end, and the commotion, the whale, was on the high end. But through the sapphire of the sea, swirled thick with the bull's crimson blood, through the salty foam and loose forests of kelp, through the pool of self-hatred in my eyes, I saw a woman—only a little more than a flash of pale skin and white hair, and she was gone. It was a brainsick reverie, I knew. I longed to allow myself to tumble in, but I hesitated, as I always did, lacking purpose even to die. The whale made the decision for me, crashing his massive tail into the boat, pitching me forward. My head struck the water as if it were shattering cold sheet glass.

It was a magnificent death. The impact rendered me nearly insensible, the icy chill dulled residual pain, water began to rush into my lungs. A man could suffer with his death, and I daresay most do, but mine had no agony. Have you wondered what dying is like? I shall tell you the end of it, the release, which must be the same for all men: Darkness folds around you, just as soft water closes around a stone tossed into a pond, claiming it.

And then a hand plucked the stone from the pond, which is not meant to happen. I was distantly aware first of lips pressed on mine, like a forgotten dream, and then of my own mouth opening. I had never kissed a woman, but I knew if I had I would not have felt such skin—smooth and slick and cool, firm to the point of unyielding. The kiss pulled me from the blackness just enough to make me feel the stab of strong fingers against my upper arms, and then I was aware of nothing.

Of course you know of the Elizabeth Islands, a little chain stretching southwest from Falmouth, and a stone's throw across the Sound to Martha's Vineyard. Every young man, including you, no doubt, has spent a day free from cares on Cuttyhunk, fishing for striped bass, drinking from a hip flask pinched from his father's gun cabinet. North of the longest chain island, Naushon, are three forsaken knuckles of rock, the Weepecket Islands. South Weepecket is where I awakened, with its view of Buzzards Bay to the north, and beyond that the harbor of New Bedford.

I lay overnight, chilled and shaking, in and out of a delirium, taking no pains to look for the lamps of rescue ships. The next morning was warm, with abundant sun and a clear robin's egg sky. My clothes had dried stiff on my body. Lying on my side, I saw black rocks in front of me, and the winking sea; I felt the scrub of dune against my back. My lips had cracked and split. My eyes had flakes of salt on the lashes. I was as far from death as I had been close to it the evening before.

I lay motionless for hours, disappointed that I lived. The sun became hot. My skin began to burn. Sand flies nipped my exposed face and neck, driven to survive, finding advantage in my lack of drive. From where I lay, my head still spinning as if I were on the ship, I could see I was on the craggy shore of the western beach, very near the high-tide line. And in time, I saw that the girl from the water was there with me, nearly concealed from view in a cluster of sunken boulders, her skin reflecting the morning light, and staring at me with wary, green eyes. They were a kind of eyes I had never seen before: large, round, heavy lidded, the pupils slit like a cat's but oriented with the horizon. If that sounds monstrous, I have failed to impart how deeply expressive they were, how without artifice, how vulnerable. We regarded each other in silence, I know not how long. She did not duck, did not slip away. I was not frightened, even when her tail—muscular as a porpoise's but darkly armored like an alligator's—twitched out of the water, in full view. She was precisely as the drunk whalers in the Stephens Arms had described her. After a time I attempted to swallow, but my throat caught, parched.

"Rise," she said at last. But though it was the imperative, it was not a command. She was, instead, willing me to my feet. I should have been astonished to see such a creature, to hear it speak.

I stared for too long, unsure of how to reply. You see, upon awaking I had at first decided, in order to finish the botched job of my drowning, that

my course of action should be *in*action, until lack of food and water killed me. Yet I did not want her to think I had not heard her, or that I was ill-mannered, and so I shook my head slowly. I was weaker than I thought. Minutes later she spoke again. “A ship is coming. It is large.” I watched her lips move. They were full, and as fair as her cheeks, nearly like chalk, except for the smoothness, the glisten, the translucence. “A small ship leads it past the reefs,” she continued, looking through me to the middle distance. It seemed she was sensing the movement of the boats—by hearing? Through the pressure of the waves? She trained her eyes on mine again. “Stand so they might see you.” This time her voice was firm, urgent.

I shook my head, which caused a shadow of bewilderment on her face, and then nothing. She studied me. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, she was gone.

I dozed, perhaps only for minutes. When I awoke, she was back, still crouched behind the boulders. And now there was a dead flounder on a flat rock between us, its dappled skin sheared open, as with a knife, and the abalone flesh exposed. Next to it, a handful of mussels, and a barnacle-encrusted porter bottle with the cork intact.

“Eat,” she said. She had brought me sustenance. She thought I was unable to rise, not unwilling. I felt a stirring in my chest. Her compassion was simple, uncalculated, unadorned. My thirst was more distracting than I had anticipated after such a short stranding, and my belly twisted on itself for lack of food. Still, I could not conceive of eating uncooked fish, and I had no corkscrew for the ale.

“I can’t.” My voice was like gravel rolling against itself.

She stared for a long while, thinking about my declaration. “Ah,” she said at last. She pulled herself on her arms to the stone, her wariness of me trumped by her practicality, and jabbed a strong finger against the cork until it was free inside the bottle, the release of the ale’s creamy froth surprising her. She laughed, setting it down again. She began prying open the mussels.

“Wait,” I said, not wanting to put her to trouble for no reason. I hoisted myself to a sitting position, steadied myself with my hands. “I…I have no way of cooking it.”

I assure you it did not escape me that I was discussing culinary equipage with an alleged mythical being; yet I in no way imagined I was delusional.

“Cooking…” She was searching her memory for the word.

“Fire,” I offered, to help her understand. “Heat or smoke, to prepare the fish.”

“It needs no fire,” she said with assurance.

“Only oysters are eaten raw,” I replied—an idiot, speaking for my entire race.

She thought again, in that deliberate way that was becoming delightful. She was unhurried, as if she marked time differently than men do. She slipped away into the water, and I found myself sorry to see her go. I eyed the porter bottle. If the shipwrecked ale killed me, I would be lucky. But more likely it would slake my thirst, no more, and keep me alive. I drank it down, ever the coward. Night came, my second on the island, and I fell asleep.

I awakened just before dawn, when the dim light makes the world look of one color. I could see objects on the flat rock. I rested until the sun rose and the amorphous shadows coalesced into separate oysters, looking like stones with rough facets hewn by a prehistoric man, and another bottle of porter resurrected from the sea floor. She was watching me—I do not know how I did not see her until that moment. She pulled herself forward again, leaned a strong hand on each oyster, and wedged open the shells with a somewhat alarming wrist fin, deftly severing the muscle of each with a sharp fingernail. She pushed the cork of the bottle in, gave me a proud little smile with closed lips, and disappeared back into the sea. I ate the oysters gratefully. Later, I rose on unsteady feet to find a place to relieve myself, and discovered among wildflowers and rushes some edible sweet peas and ripe bayberries, which I collected and brought back to the rocky beach. As I savored the peas and berries, I entertained the thought that I might disappear and live there forever under her care, eating oysters and drinking porter, until I recalled autumn and winter in New England.

Days went by, and when she wasn’t with me I found myself staring at the ocean, waiting for her, time taking on the pace of the girl herself—languid, but with an undercurrent of passion. I learned to be still and patient but wholly alert. Whenever a ship passed near enough to spy me, I lay flat among the tall grasses. If she was with me, she would urge, “Rise,” and I would refuse, but now it was for a different reason.

When we were together we spoke of everything, and sometimes of nothing, comfortable in silence. Her speech was antiquated, but excellent,

peppered with words of the Wampanoag when English escaped her. She had a thirst to learn; I developed a hunger to teach.

"My name is Resolved," I told her on the third morning. "Resolved Stanton." She smiled, lips closed, but said nothing. "It is customary to reply with your own name," I instructed, smiling back.

"I have no such custom." Her manner was easy, even playful.

"Please," I pleaded. "What shall I call you?"

"You needn't call me, because I am here," she said, bemused. And now she was more circumspect. "In these waters, it is safer for you not to speak or think my name."

The next day I brought her sweet peas and bayberries. And in return she brought me a pearl, impossibly large, a perfect sphere, seemingly green in color until the sunlight revealed the iridescent shades of a peacock feather. I kept it close, in the breast pocket of my shirt. I began to forget that our time together could not be permanent.

On the fifth night, to remind me of impermanence, there was a hurricane. She was not with me. The wind threatened to blow me out to sea. I wedged myself between sunken boulders in the chilled water, the spray stinging my skin like thousands of lancets, praying to God to preserve the life I had tried to discard just days before.

When the winds calmed and the sun rose, I was cut and bruised and shaking with tremors. I reached first for my pocket, relieved to feel the pearl through the cloth. She came to my side, her eyes shadowed, and through the strength of her words, without touching me, coaxed me until I dragged my body nearly on the shore, where I lay quaking with a blossoming fever. She leaned down then and kissed my lips.

It has forever haunted me that I was too ill to inscribe her eyes, her mouth, that gentle pressure to my memory. Hundreds of thousands of times, in the privacy of my mind, I stared at that kiss through frosted glass, and wished I could see more.

But always I remembered what she said after she kissed me. "There is a ship not far away. I beg you to rise and signal your presence."

For the first time in my life, due no doubt to the fever, I answered boldly, howbeit with a weak voice. "I will not leave you."

She was silent then, for so long that I closed my eyes and I may have lost my senses. Finally, through the fog of my mind, I heard her say, "If you stay, Noo'kas will see to it that you die here. Leave, and when you are well

again, return by boat. I vow I will come to this spot each day for the next year to look for you." She whispered this in my ear before she left: "Save yourself, please, so that we may meet again."

Without her by my side, willing me to my feet through the force of her spirit, I could do nothing more than sit, with my head spinning as it did on that first morning. I saw the ship approach: a schooner with its rigging slack—so cumbrous it required two pilot boats to navigate the Bay, leaving ample time for the crew to see a gesticulating man. For the first time since arriving on the island I intended to rise, if only I could manage it.

But before I could lift myself, a grotesque appeared before me—a rotted, ancient version of the girl, so hideous I cannot describe her without my stomach rising. I recoiled as she pulled herself toward me on her arms.

"Fair warning, from her queen," she said, her voice like the sharp crack that comes before the boom of thunder. "Make no mistake: She will kill you." I stared, struck dumb by the sight and sound of her, my mouth gaping, useless. She said, "Every man dies who is foolish enough to love Syrenka. You will be no different."

It was the first time I had heard the name of the girl. It was the first time I understood that I loved her.

"Think on it." The hag's voice sliced through me. "The land is forbidden her, and you will be tempted into the water. That is how your death will happen. If instead you leave now and never look back, you will live—a long life."

I closed my eyes against her pitted nostrils, her sparse hair hanging limp on her shoulders, her exposed, sagging flesh. The smell of decayed fish wafted on the breeze between us. She spoke again, describing my drowning in detail. I felt the saltwater flood my lungs and burn my nostrils, Syrenka's fierce hands clawing me down, crushing my limbs. My chest burst with the pain. The blackness did not envelop me like soft pond water this time, it clubbed me. But more vivid even than that was the alternative path the queen set before me: the life I would lead after my rescue. I saw it, dear Thomas, as surely as if I were living it. I broke warm bread, felt and heard family and friends. There was an honest wife, tumbling children, a home, the thriving business of flensing blubber from whales hauled ashore, the captains boiling their blubber in the Stanton Tryworks, the Stanton Chandlery Shop in town, with rigging lofts on the upper floors, a counting room, and a small, loyal staff of men who raised their families on the work I

gave them. I knew them all from the painting her words created. At the end of it I was an old man—very old, as I am now. I saw that I had lived what other men call a good life.

"A vision of the future," the hag said, "and you have only to choose the right path. Which will it be? Certain death, or a long, contented life?"

I heard something land at my feet and I opened my eyes, stunned by the real world in front of me, by the sun and ocean and sand, by my young hands and arms, shocked to see the schooner that was now within shouting distance. A sack made of fine fish netting, filled with heavy gold coins, lay beside me, something from a sunken galleon. And the hag was gone. I took the bag and staggered to my feet. I flagged the schooner. I told myself, swallowing doubt, that I would return to Syrenka when I had made my fortune.

The sailors rowed out to me, clapped me on the back when they heard my name, told me all of Provincetown had given up hope, and asked me to lead them to the other castaway.

"There is no other," I said.

"We saw two of you near the shore," one of them said.

"I was alone."

Days passed into weeks, and then months. Always the prophecy hung over me—my private sword of Damocles. The vision of my death by drowning horrified me, hypocrite that I was, and during that next year I found many excuses not to return to South Weepecket. The consummate reason arrived in the form of Martha: excessively plain, mild, deceptively persistent with cakes and pies and kind words in church. She was the sort of girl who would work hard in a partnership, who would keep a good home. I found myself pledged to her, the wedding plans set in motion by her energetic mother, and my panicked thoughts of Syrenka were too late. I had laid the foundation of my prison walls. I thought every day of Syrenka surfacing near Weepecket, not seeing me, sinking back into the deep, alone. Years later, when I knew she could no longer be waiting for me, daydreams of her crippled me.

Everything the hag predicted came true, but in gray tones, not in vibrant colors. Martha bore babies, my company bore profits, my children—freed of a life of labor—went away to school and never returned, I lived too long. It was a life without Syrenka's inquiring eyes, without her free heart. One day when I was quite alone, I fileted a fresh, raw flounder and ate it.

This is the juncture in my tale beyond which Mr. Billington has no advantage over you. A fortnight ago I waited in my carriage outside of the bank as he retrieved from my safe deposit the leather pouch you now hold in your hands. Buried in blankets, I might have seemed asleep. A sometime customer of mine named Olaf Ontstaan stood nearby with a lobster fisherman and discussed in hushed tones a young Plymothian named Ezra Doyle—recently bereft of his father—seen by the men of a trawler leaning over a rowboat, enthralled with a pale mermaid, who sensed they were being watched and slipped into the depths. The lobster fisherman offered his own gossip in exchange: Mr. Doyle had been seen loitering on the tip of the rocky outcropping south of Plymouth Wharf by the light of a full moon, on his hands and knees, muttering into the water like a madman. At last I understood why the sea witch had preserved my life beyond reason: first to cause the acid ache of eighty-four years without Syrenka, and now the knife wound of knowing the man who had taken my place.

I hired a stagecoach with four horses and a boy to take me to Mr. Doyle's home in Plymouth—an arduous eleven-hour ride that pummeled my buttocks until I was bruised. I had known his father, a shipbuilder of integrity and some local renown, and I used that connection to gain entry with his housekeeper, Mrs. Banks. Mr. Doyle greeted me with warmth. We spoke of this and that, none of it important, none of it my true mission. My vision was clouded, but not enough to avoid his beauty. I saw what I had when I was young—unkempt hair, a lithe, lean body, the heart of a poet—and so much more: the conviction of a lover.

I leaned in close before we parted, his bewildered expression the only indication that he was humoring a senseless visit. I said, in the raspy, toothless voice of an old man, "When you give your heart to the ocean, you either drown, or spend your life wishing you had drowned." He smiled kindly and shook my hand good-bye.

It was evening when I left him and the moon was out, glorious and waxing gibbous. A sudden thought caused me to stop the coach on Water Street and have the boy escort me to the rocky outcropping, over shifting sand, leaning heavily on him until we reached the moistened, packed shore, after which I dismissed him with a coin. Scaling the slick rocks of the outcropping as Mr. Doyle had done was out of the question, and so I rested my frail frame against it, the icy tide licking my feet numb, waiting until dark. Within the hour, the weather changed, the temperature dropped, yet I

hardly noticed the chill or my trembling, which would burgeon when I returned home into the illness that consumes me now. I tossed stones feebly into the water—a calling card of sorts, I prayed. Eventually, a miracle: I spied her luminescence, swirling like liquid smoke, and I was carried back in time. It was as if eight decades had not happened, yet I was inexplicably ancient. She surfaced only to her eyes, assessed me from a distance in the moonlight, and then, I saw, recognized me, I know not how. She approached, and we regarded each other in silence, our old habit. But I was there to speak; I had not the luxury of time.

"I came to say…" The words choked me. She was as beautiful as the day I left her. I was a bag of loose flesh and bones. I could not stop the tears as I finished. "…to say…I'm sorry."

She thought about this carefully, and in that small silence I missed her more than I ever had. Finally she said a low "Thank you."

I should have left it there, the better ending. But I could not accept the blame for my own mistake.

"Your queen showed me a prophecy the day the ship came, a vision of the future. I had no choice."

She cocked her head. I thought I saw a wistful smile, but if I did it was gone too quickly, replaced with pleasant indifference. Her heart belonged to another.

"The sea witch has much magic," she said at last. "But she has never had the power of prophecy."

And now, patient Thomas, you may open the leather pouch, which contains my dearest treasure, Syrenka's pearl. Find a woman who makes you long to give it to her. Choose wisely when your time comes. Live—or die—without regret. And remember me as ever, your affectionate great-grandfather,

Resolved Henry Stanton

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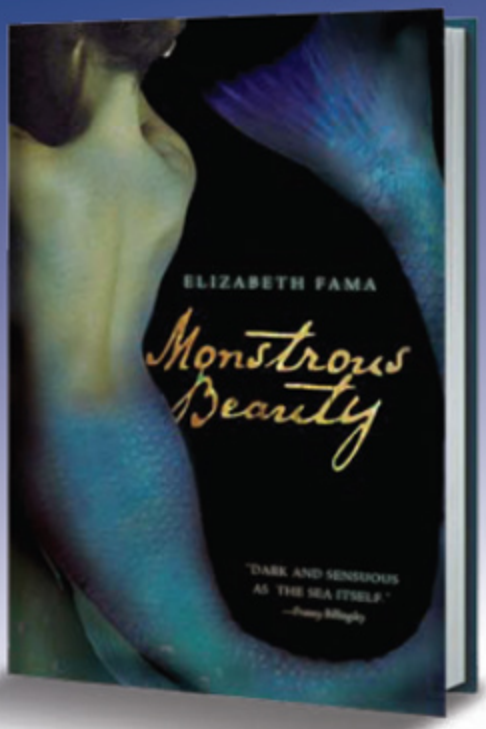
"Dark and sensuous as the sea itself."
—FRANNY BILLINGSLEY, AUTHOR OF *CHIME*

FOR SOME, FALLING IN LOVE HAS DEADLY CONSEQUENCES.



Hester tries to unearth the key to her family's tragic past, but powerful forces will do anything to keep her from discovering her connection to a man named Ezra and the beautiful mermaid Syrenka.

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LISH McBRIDE
HEADS WILL ROLL

LISH McBRIDE

Heads Will Roll

illustration by

HANNAH CHRISTENSON

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Begin Reading

The warehouse air burned along my skin after the crisp snap of the outside weather. The new warmth didn't make me loosen my jacket. Warm or not, I wasn't going to get too comfortable. I kept walking, scanning the milling group, searching for the sign-in spot, knowing that I'd stop feeling the chill in a minute. Sometimes the arenas aren't heated, or air-conditioned, but apparently this one had enough income to tend to these things. Of course, the combatants fight better if they're warm, so I suppose the heat is in the management's own self-interest.

A skinny reed of a man with a whiteboard sat at a table in the middle of the room, pointedly ignoring everyone. I cleared my throat to get his attention. He kept writing for a moment, and then, without looking up, said, "Name?"

"Lena," I said.

He grabbed a list to his left and scanned. Finally, he made eye contact.

"You with Phantom?"

I nodded, shoving my hands into my pockets. I had to do my best not to laugh. I was supposed to be a cold-hearted handler, which means no giggling. But seriously, "Phantom"? Only in Steve's dreams.

The man frowned at his sheet. "And Phantom is a *Unicornis*, correct?"

Again, I nodded.

"Are you sure he's going to fight?" He looked skeptical.

I kept my gaze on him, solid and heavy. With some people, you don't even have to glare.

"Because sometimes, they refuse," he continued.

"Phantom will fight." He always does.

"Good. You won't get paid if he doesn't." He checked something off on the form and put it away. "Go around to the side entrance. Phantom will be in prep stall B. Please follow the instructions there, or he won't be allowed to fight. Keep him away from the other combatants. If there's any trouble, he won't fight. The judge will check you"—he glanced at the sports watch on his wrist—"in about half an hour. Your fighter ain't ready, he don't fight. Understood?"

“Yes, sir.” What I wanted to say was “Maybe you should repeat it one more time in case I didn’t quite get it, genius.” Steve would be so proud of me for holding my tongue.

The man glared at me, I think searching for sarcasm in the “sir.” Then he jerked his head toward the door. “Go.”

My boot made a loud squeak as I turned on my heel and went back to the trailer for “Phantom.”

Phantom is a stage name. The name *Steve* isn’t intimidating, nor does it sound like the kind of name a unicorn should have. Or at least the kind of name that people think a unicorn should have. Unicorns pick their own names, and I’d love to see someone go up to Steve and tell him he chose poorly. I, for one, would think twice about it.

The trailer we travel in is banged up on the outside, and I can barely see anything through the exterior slats. It desperately needs some paint. A nice new trailer would stick out at the fights, so we keep it looking dingy. The inside, however, is plush, and I took out the divider between us so that we could listen to audio books and music together on long drives. We fight over radio stations a lot.

Steve prefers to be covered for transport. A thin blanket keeps him warm and blocks out everything but his eyes, nose, horn, and the lower half of his legs. What can be seen, I’ve blackened with shoe polish. His coloring will cause a stir, and I like to leave the upset until the last minute.

On our way from the trailer, we passed a yowie manacled to the back of a truck. Its stench was instantly recognizable. If you left the most fetid, nasty gym clothes to fester in a closed, hot locker for a summer with a dead swamp rat, you might get close to the smell of a yowie. They’re sort of like a rabid, vicious, no-neck cousin to Bigfoot, except they’re completely brainless. Not too surprisingly, everyone was giving it a wide berth.

Steve and I were met at the back entrance by two bored-looking thugs acting as guards. The cops were paid to look the other way, but that didn’t mean guards weren’t needed in case undesirables showed up. Taking a good look at them, I decided that the thugs probably judged desirability by wallet size alone. Steve snorted in agreement. He didn’t think much of the hired muscle, either. I felt Steve’s mental presence in my head—it’s warm and bright like sunshine and for a second, I could smell springtime and flowers.

The first time Steve spoke in my mind, I thought I had a tumor. It’s like a full body hallucination—you smell and feel things that aren’t really there.

This time Steve was informing me that the guards, like most humans, have minds like open cesspools. He doesn't think much of people. Can't say I blame him. Unicorns are champions of nature and man spends his time destroying it, so yeah, we're not exactly in Steve's top five favorite things. I'm pretty sure we're right behind fungus on his list. The sunshine in my head told me I was exaggerating, and I rested a hand on Steve's shoulder, letting him know I appreciated him, too.

Once I got Steve into his stall, I removed his leg warmers. The action was robotic, habit. My eyes wandered as I went through the motions. There were a few dozen stalls in the kennels, most of them full. Steel and reinforced concrete on all sides. There were heavy doors on them, each with a lock. I didn't use my lock. Evenly spaced drains marked the floors, as did dents and scorch marks—evidence of creatures that got out of control. All the concrete on the walls was painted white, everything built in an easy-to-wash kind of way. I patted Steve on the flank. The gentle slap sounded odd in the stall.

I leaned in and breathed his scent, my hands scratching along the bottom of his jaw. I pushed my mind into his, wondering not for the first time if my presence was unpleasant to him. Steve may be sunshine and springtime, fresh grass and butterflies, but I'm the sound of creaking leather, the smell of sweat and blood. I'm battle cries, death rattles, and the light touch of a swan's feather. Steve nudged me back into reality. *We don't have to do this,* I reminded him. *We can simply break the locks, free the creatures, and walk away.*

Only we couldn't. It's too easy to just buy a new lock.

So I got on with it.

The stall we were in was long, rectangular, each side covered with posters, flyers, and a large red-and-white instructional sign. I didn't need to read it to know that it said no weapons, no interfering, and no poison. That was why I pulled off Steve's blanket. Each animal got a thorough bath before the fights began. The judge would come and check his coat for poison, his hooves for weapons, sharpening, and any illegal advantages. The shower seemed ridiculous to me. Poison wouldn't last on Steve's coat. Unicorns and poisons just don't mix.

I yanked off his hood and heard a small gasp. Steve flicked his muzzle, motioning me to turn around. A scrawny teenager with a broom stood in front of the stall, goggling.

“I’ve…wow.” He paused to swallow and flushed a little when he caught my look. “Sorry, it’s just that we don’t get many like him, and never white ones.”

Of course not. White means purity. And there wasn’t much purity in this building. I couldn’t help a small smile. “You wanna touch him?”

The kid’s eyes went wide and he started to reach out, but pulled his hand back. I noticed a thin, puckered scar snaking up his arm. He followed my eyes and tugged his sleeve a little, self-conscious. “Nemean lion,” he said.

The kid was lucky he still had an arm, and a body to go with it. The thought must have registered on my face because he got a little defensive.

“It was a just a baby,” he said, “and it was so cute. How was I supposed to know—?”

“That he was a sweet little fuzzball of death?” I asked. “Look around.” I gestured to the stables, the scorch marks, and the hydra three stalls down that was trying to chew through his chains. Even with seven heads, he couldn’t manage it. “Assume everything can tear off your face, and you’ll be okay.” I handed him a currycomb and waved toward Steve. “But this one won’t bite you.” I grabbed another brush and started on the opposite side. Cute baby Nemean lions. Geez, who was this kid? Steve snorted and leaned into me. I knew what he meant. It’s always surprising where innocence hides. You can even find it in a place like this.

The kid paused in his brushing to trace a couple of the raised scars down Steve’s side. “He’s fought before?”

“A few times,” I said. More times than I could count.

“I thought they were hard to damage?” he said.

“They are.” I went back to brushing.

Most people won’t use unicorns to fight. Too unpredictable. Too independent. You don’t rule a unicorn—you’re a partner at best. And the people who do use them to fight don’t have white ones. They train them like you train dogs for a cage match. Get them young, young as you can. Starve them. Beat them. Slip blood into their milk. Give them a taste for it. Keep them hungry and angry all the time. Pervert them until they don’t know which way is up anymore. That’s how you make a unicorn, a natural pacifist, a fighter. Of course the taint shows up in their coats. The few I have seen fight have been black, red, brown, gray—anything but white.

But there is another way. Find one that thinks the way that you do. That sometimes fighting is right. Necessary. That bloodshed is the only possible method to make people learn the hard lessons. Meld with them until you don't know if you're getting them on your side or if they're getting you onto theirs. A strange, violent harmony. Sunshine glinting off a slashing blade. The creak of leather armor in springtime.

Steve nudged into my thoughts to let me know that I would make a terrible poet.

The kid reluctantly handed me the currycomb. "I better get back to work," he said.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jonah," he said.

"Jonah, how long you been working here?"

"A couple of months," he said.

He said it nonchalantly, like he couldn't be bothered to know how long exactly, but I had a feeling that in the back of his brain, Jonah had been tallying the exact minutes. Six months, probably. Six months and I bet he'd *still* try to pet a Nemean lion. That long in the muck and Jonah continued to believe in good. I could see it in his eyes, even if Steve hadn't let me know. The kid looked like cannon fodder to me. Steve snorted again—his version of a laugh.

"Why here?" I asked.

"Dad's dead. Mom has to stay home a lot with my little sister."

He looked about fourteen, maybe fifteen. Too young to get more than a few hours at a crap job that underpaid him. Too young to get a job to pay the rent and put food on the table.

"Pay that good?" I asked.

He gave me a shy smile, ducking his head back down to look at his broom. "Beats mowing lawns," he said, pushing his shaggy brown hair out of his eyes.

Yeah, I wanted to say, but the lawn never tries to eat you. I couldn't handle it. I grabbed my wallet and took out all the cash I had, which was just shy of three hundred dollars. "Do me a favor, Jonah?"

The scrawny kid looked up from his sweeping. "Sure," he said.

He didn't even ask what the favor might be. Definitely cannon fodder. I shoved the money into his hand a little harder than I meant to. "Take the rest of the day off, kid. Please."

His eyes bugged a little at the money. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” I said.

“My boss…”

Should be beaten for hiring a kid, but I kept that to myself. Most of these places hired kids. I never got used to it, though. I fingered one of the long scars down Steve’s withers. “Just tell them your mom’s sick or something, okay?”

Jonah nodded and shoved the money into his pocket. He shuffled nervously on his feet for a minute, seeming unsure as to which way to go. Finally, he leaned his broom against the wall, nodded, and walked out the door.

Steve turned his head toward me and shoved my chin with his muzzle. I leaned my face against the soft velvet for a minute, and then went back to brushing him.

By the time the judge came around, Steve had been brushed, washed, and was ready to go. When he’s clean like that he damn near *glows.* Unicorns have been regarded as symbols of purity, innocence, and good for so long that it’s hard to shake it from your mind. As I pulled Steve in front of the judge, those were the words that came to mind. Steve is eighteen hands of purity, just not the kind they’re thinking of. Justice can be pure, too.

People also associate purity with words like *feminine* and *dainty,* but Steve is about as dainty as a tank. If you put a saddle and armor on him, he could be a war horse. A hoof came down gently on my foot. I hadn’t been paying attention and I’d missed what the judge said.

“Excuse me?”

“He’s a beaut,” the judge repeated. The judge was pale and a little sweaty despite the weather outside. He smelled sour, like he had an aversion to water except for the ice in his highball. He didn’t offer me a name, and I wasn’t surprised. The judge continued to run his hands over and through Steve’s mane, coat, and hooves. He found nothing but scars. I could tell he was surprised that Steve had fought before, though he tried to hide it. He took one solid look at my unicorn. Finally, he nodded at me. “Never thought I’d see the day. A *white* unicorn.” He rested a gentle hand on my partner, and for a split second I could see behind the judge’s mask. Regret nestled there. Longing. A yearning for something he thought was

long gone or not possible. Then the moment was gone and the mask came back.

"You'll fight in the third round," the judge said. "Good luck." He started to walk away, but looked back over his shoulder. "Pity," he mumbled. I wanted to ask him why, out of every competitor here, Steve was the pity. Because of what he symbolizes? Steve started to walk back into the stall, and I followed him. Pity. What a useless emotion when you don't act on it. Pity is supposed to trigger compassion. The judge had forgotten that. But we'd show him. We'd show him you're supposed to stand up, not walk away.

We always did.

I went in early to watch. The fights were held in the main room of the warehouse, which resembled an airplane hangar. Taking up most of the space was a chain-link domed monstrosity of a cage sitting in the middle. Chainlink may not seem like much of a deterrent, but the fencing was magic and warded. I could see it, even if the crowd couldn't. I didn't really think it mattered. The animals were too beaten down and trained to even consider escape on their own.

Metal bleachers flanked the dome, each one full to bursting with people you would never expect to see on a cheap metal seat in a warehouse. Let's just say that if you went looking under those bleachers for loose change you'd probably come back with handfuls of hundred dollar bills. For these guys, that *was* loose change.

There were a few people here and there in cheap jeans and threadbare jackets, their watches knockoffs of Rolexes, their phones last year's models. Faces like mine. Trainers.

The first fight was a nonfatal win, harpy versus manticore. The harpy strutted around, her sharp talons clicking against the concrete, her filthy feathers rustling, muck-encrusted breasts hanging down to her scrawny bird knees. Her eyes were mad and she foamed from her mouth, screeching insults from a twisted maw. The manticore paced, his lion body smooth and feline, looking graceful despite the incongruous man-head that stared the harpy down. The harpy looked like she was going to lose, but in the last second she hamstrung one of the manticore's back legs. The combatants weren't allowed outside weapons, but teeth and claws didn't count. The harpy used her own talons to slice into the manticore's flesh and tear muscle. The wound would probably get infected. I've seen what harpy nails

look like. Odds were heavy that, even though neither creature died in the bout, there would be a delayed fatality.

The second match featured a minotaur and a wepwawet. The minotaur loomed over the wepwawet, who was tall for a human, which was the majority of his body—except humans don't have the head of a jackal. I'd never seen a wepwawet up close. In the ring they were even more rare than creatures like Steve. The jackal-headed creatures were supposed to be sacred to the god Anubis. They were guides to the underworld, protectors, not fighters. Like unicorns.

The minotaur moved slowly on muscle-bound legs. Its upper body was wide, like a bull on steroids. The minotaur kept charging, but then the wepwawet would just sidestep, duck, all defensive moves. His body language said calm, his muscles relaxed and loose. Like I said, they're rare, so my experience was nonexistent, but everything was telling me that the wepwawet wasn't into the fight. Unlike the minotaur, the wepwawet was clothed, but only in some sort of golden skirt and two rude copper bracelets. The skirt swayed and moved with him, almost a part of him. The bracelets glinted dully. They weren't his; I knew that with an odd certainty. The wepwawet would never be so crude.

The minotaur began to wheeze. Must have taken a lot of energy to move that bulk around, and the prolonged fighting began to wear it down. After a few minutes, the wepwawet seemed to take pity, and in a blur he struck down the minotaur. The jackal refused to take the kill but left the minotaur bleeding on the floor, unconscious.

As he left, I swear he looked at me—right in my eyes, down to the dusty corners of my being. I couldn't pull away. The jackal had large black pupils and glowing golden irises that for some reason made me think of how Steve had seemed to glow earlier. In Egyptian mythos, the wepwawet leads souls down into the underworld. He throws the discarded souls onto a giant scale. If your essence is as light as the feather that rests in the other balance, you go to the afterlife. If not, he feeds you to a giant hippolike creature. I forget what it's called. I just know that you don't want it to eat you. Or your essence.

Finally the wepwawet blinked and kept walking. I stood still for another beat, stuck in that frozen moment you get sometimes when confronted with something amazing and beautiful. When I came back to myself, I wondered

what the wepwawet had seen in me—whether or not my soul was hippo food.

The audience milled impatiently while I went to get Steve. Two nonfatal matches back to back struck me as a rare event, and the crowd began to get bloodthirsty. They'd get their fill. Steve never disappointed.

The murmuring died as we walked in. For a blink, there was nothing but glorious silence. Then a swell of voices broke out, crashing into me as I walked by. Gasps, whispers, outright shouts—a few people even stood. I concentrated on the crisp bite of Steve's hooves on the concrete as we walked into the cage.

In the other corner, a chained waheela snarled at us. Waheelas are usually found in Alaska or Canada, anywhere remote and cold. We were about twenty minutes outside of Chicago. Not really their prime habitat. They look like a polar bear and an arctic wolf had a baby. Long, white coats, broad, flat heads, and the bulk of a bear, but the rest of them is all wolf. This one had been shaved, and the collar around his neck looked like it had been there for a while. Waheelas were loners, and avoided confrontation unless they were hungry. Like most animals, they don't fight for sport. But this one looked like he had been kept hungry for a long time. The owner standing next to him looked pretty well fed, though.

The whistle blew, the chains were dropped, and I stepped away from Steve to make my way quickly out of the cage. The waheela's owner was gone long before the chains hit the ground.

The creature let loose a throat-rattling howl and the temperature dropped. Ice formed on the floor around him and began to spread out. Steve gave a disdainful snort and put his horn against the frozen floor. Soon there were puddles instead of ice. That was a new trick, even to me.

The waheela hurled himself at Steve, causing a horrific crash as the two tumbled into the side of the cage. Both of them righted themselves, but the wolf-creature seemed groggy. He blinked a few times, tilting his head at Steve like he was listening, his features relaxing and losing some of their frenzied look. Then the thing went down, as they say, like a ton of fuzzy bricks.

The crowd roared. The fight had been too short. No bloodshed. Was the thing even dead? I could only hear random snippets through all the yelling, but I got the gist of things. Both the well-fed owner and I were motioned back into the cage. The man made sure I went first, proving that chivalry is

indeed dead. I'd like to say he ran to the waheela's side out of concern, but instead he walked slowly over and kicked him. I hovered at the cage door, making the attendant keep it open.

Even though I'd been paying attention, I barely caught the movement. A quick blur, a spray of blood, too fast for the waheela's owner to even scream. He just suddenly had no leg. Or I should say his leg was suddenly elsewhere. It hit the ground with a wet thud a split second later. Then the waheela pounced, and I could no longer see his handler. Blood poured and splattered, but by the time it hit concrete, it was freezing into patterns, like hoarfrost on a window. It was kind of pretty.

I hadn't been inside the waheela's head when Steve tapped him in the arena—that was Steve's power, not mine—but I can imagine how it had gone. There had been a first time for me, too. Had to be a shock for a cold-based creature's head to suddenly be filled with that springtime mind. Still, he hadn't argued. He'd thrown the fight like Steve suggested. They didn't always. Occasionally a creature had been so beaten down and abused that its mind was broken and all it knew was the fight. That's why Steve had scars. And that was why we kept going to these fights. Someone had to stick up for the little guy. Sooner or later, the promoters had to give up, right? Either that, or we'd eventually run out of promoters. Steve and I would see to that.

The crowd panicked and swirled, some running for the exits, some yelling at the bloodshed, happy they'd finally seen something die. Handlers, animals, what did the spectators care? In their minds, I guess it was the same.

The attendant tried to slam the door, but I stubbornly held it open, like a human doorstop. Steve came charging out, a brilliant blur. I sidestepped, grabbed onto his mane, and swung up—a movement worn smooth with practice. Steve plowed through the crowd, scattering people in his wake. I reached back and moved my ponytail aside so I could get down the back of my jacket. The metal was warm to the touch as I yanked the bronze rod from its harness. My fingers found the slight depressions and I squeezed until the ends extended, the metal sliding out with a hiss. I raised my spear above my head and screamed my battle cry. Funny thing about these matches—they pat down the creatures, but they never, ever checked the handlers.

Another battle cry tore from my throat, and I heard answering cries from the kennels. The air crackled around me, and I knew if I looked at myself I'd see my mother's blessing crystallize in a bronze circlet on my brow, my jacket morphing into a cape of swan feathers. Steve's mind met mine. Sunshine and green fields.The iron tang of bloodshed and the reek of sweat. I grinned like a mad thing. Steve reared and I laughed at both of us showing off.

The people in front of us screamed and tried to flee, but we ignored them and crushed our way back to the kennels.

Some idiot tried to block us. As he held one arm out, the other clutching a box of betting slips, I recognized the reedy-looking man from check-in. The two security guards from earlier flanked him, clearly pissed that they hadn't caught my weapon. Pissed turned to terrified as we charged them. Even the guards figured out that the two of them versus an angry chick with a nine-foot barbed spear perched on eighteen hands of unicorn fury was a no-contest fight. The check-in guy stood his ground. I stabbed past him, dragging the barbed edge against the side of his thigh as I pulled back. He collapsed, dropping the betting slips in his hurry to cover the wound. It would hurt like hell, but he wouldn't bleed out into his own personal paper blizzard as long as he sought medical attention. It was probably more than he deserved.

We swung past the cages, Steve slowing his gallop as I leaned down and started slicing locks. I freed the hydra, two centaurs, a chimera, three hellhounds, a woozy minotaur, and what might or might not have been a chupacabra. After that, I stopped paying attention and just started opening doors.

The last cage contained the wepwawet. Steve slowed to a walk, and I slid off his back. The wepwawet stood, head high, stately gold eyes drifting from me to Steve. He dipped his chin toward the unicorn, who mimicked the movement back. I twisted my spear and broke the lock.

The wepwawet walked casually toward us, out of his cage.

I watched every movement, my spear gripped tightly in my right hand as I wiped a bead of what was either sweat or blood off my cheek. You'd be surprised how similar those two substances can be.

He stopped in front of me. *That is a fine weapon*.

The words floated into my head like music, the tone a bass roar from an orchestra. I grinned and held the spear up to him on the flats of my palms.

“It’s celestial,” I said.

Valkyrie? He made it a question.

I shook my head. “Only half,” I said, “on my mother’s side.”

And your father?

“A mechanic from Rhode Island.”

His tongue lolled out. It made him look like he was laughing at me.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

He extended his bronzed hands, palms up, toward my spear. *If I may?*

I handed it over to him, and with a ringing clang, he struck the barbed blade against the cuffs on each of his wrists. They fell to the floor, charred and ruined. Satisfied, he handed the blade back to me.

I’d been right. They weren’t his.

They were restrictive. He reached out and a void appeared—an oval of blackness in space. He reached into the void, and when he pulled his arm back out he was holding a nasty looking scimitar. Then he repeated the motion and pulled out another. One for each hand. He gave them an experimental heft.

He saluted me with one of the scimitars. *Now*, his voice whispered in my mind, *you will have to excuse me. I have many to lead into the underworld. Not all of my fellow prisoners have fled. Some have stayed to seek their revenge upon their owners. I cannot say that I blame them.* He lowered his arms to his sides, the tips of the blades in his hands almost kissing the concrete. *I am in your debt, and I will never forget it. If you ever need a favor, you call for Ed.*

He didn’t tell me how to call him. I guess I would just have to scream “Ed” into the night and hope something happened. I watched him as he exited the kennel. I should have asked him to give me a leg up before he left. Metal bit into my hands as I climbed one of the kennel doors and clambered onto Steve’s back. It’s harder to get up at a dead stop, especially wearing a cape made of swan feathers. It’s just as difficult to climb a kennel door with a spear in your hand. Sometimes my heritage is a pain in the butt. I leaned into Steve, tired. With the adrenaline gone, I didn’t have much left in me.

Steve began to walk out, leaving the screams behind us. Perhaps the fights would die down for a while. But they’d start up again. I knew I’d have to keep my ear to the ground, listen to see if the survivors talked. No one would believe the few who did. A white unicorn that fought? A

fairytale. A rumor. The after effects of a head injury. Anything but the truth. We hadn't had any problems so far, but I'd keep a close eye on the rumor mill anyway and see what whispers evolved.

That was the thing about humans. They found it so easy to discard the implausible and the unbelievable. People ignored anything that made them uncomfortable. A forgetful, ungrateful race that looked at unicorns and saw purity, and looked at me and saw the weakness they thought inherent in my sex. Gone is the memory of the unicorn as the protector of the forest, the guardian of the weak and innocent. Vanished are the warrior women of antiquity. The furies. The morrigan. The valkyries. Violence was in our blood, but humans have forgotten all that.

Steve and I together, we created balance. We just did it vigilante-style. Hey, it had worked so far.

I kept my spear out, holding it loosely at my side. I trusted Steve not to jolt me off his back. A soft padding sound came from behind me. We both turned our heads and discovered the waheela trotting behind us. Some of his white fuzz was matted with blood and dirt. He paused, then sat, looking like a patient wolf. A mutant patient wolf.

I looked at Steve. If a look could be a shrug, that's what he gave me.

"You wanna come with us?" I asked.

The waheela stood, and I swear his tail *wagged*. It's a little less friendly when the wagger is encrusted in his former owner's blood.

The bushes next to me rustled then, and the waheela's head snapped in that direction, but he didn't growl. Jonah stepped out of the bush, his hands shaking as they held onto a flimsy blue jacket. I had to give him some credit, though—his voice only shook a little as he asked me if it was safe to be in the open.

"I told you to go home," I said.

"I forgot my jacket."

"You could have bought a new jacket."

He shook his head, his lips pressed tight, and I got it. No way Jonah would spend money that could go to his family when he could just run back in and grab it. Cannon fodder. The kid was lucky he hadn't been *eaten*. I shrugged and tapped Steve. We needed to reach our trailer and get going. Then I needed to find a car wash for the waheela to run through. When Steve didn't move, I looked to see what the holdup was and discovered three pairs of puppy-dog eyes on mine. Oh, no. Hell no. Absolutely not. I

glared at Steve, thinking, *Traitor*. He didn't feel one speck of guilt over it, either.

Jonah surged forward and then pulled himself back, hesitant. He twisted his jacket in his hands. "I'm good with them," he said. "I can help out. I'm useful, I promise. I just—I can't not work. And this place…" He trailed off, eyes darting to the side door as a lady wearing a white fur coat came stumbling out. She staggered to the side and vomited, and I could see a pink smear of blood down her back. I didn't think it was hers. Steve made a "fur is murder" joke in my head and I hit him.

"This place won't be open any time soon," Jonah said, his eyes never leaving the woman. "Please."

"We travel a lot," I said. "Won't your family want you home?"

He shook his head quickly. "As long as I send money, they won't care."

Jonah and I stared at each other for a good two minutes while Steve and I argued silently. Finally, I broke. "I guess today is our day to pick up strays," I said, holding out a hand to him. He let out a whoop and ran to us so I could pull him up behind me. He weighed almost nothing. I looked over at the waheela. With his fur so short, I could count his ribs. What a motley crew. A warrior chick and a battle unicorn, now that was an image to inspire fear. But a warrior chick, a unicorn, a half-starved kid, and a mangy mutant dog? Not so much.

Jonah sneezed and I turned. "You okay?"

He blushed. "I'm allergic to feathers."

"Of course you are," I said, turning back around as he sneezed again. We finally started heading toward the trailer, away from the now eerily silent warehouse and the vomiting woman. "Allergic. We're supposed to be badasses, Jonah, walking off into the sunset, the smell of victory in the air. Your sneezing fit is ruining our image."

"Sorry." He sniffed. "The sun won't set for another hour or two anyway."

"Shut up, Jonah."

"Do I have to give you back the money?"

"No. And stop talking. Heroes don't chatter as they ride off into the horizon."

"Does it always taste like sunshine when the unicorn talks to you?"

"Yes. What did he say?"

"He said what he loves most about you is your stoicism and patience."

“Steve’s a liar. He’s pathological. That’s the first thing you need to know. Now gimme ten bucks back—I’m going to stop at the first gas station I see and buy some earplugs.” He sniffled. “Make that thirty. You’re getting some allergy medication.”

“Okay. I bet by then it will be sunset and we can drive the trailer into it and then you can have your moment.”

I rolled my eyes, slumping in the saddle as I did. I had this terrible image of us riding into our next fight to a soundtrack of sneezes. Then Steve butted in with his sunshine-mind and reminded me that image wasn’t everything, and it was better than leaving the kid behind. He reminded me that I’d thought of Jonah as cannon fodder earlier in the day. Then he pulled up an image of a scrawny teenager with braces—yours truly—and pushed the word *potential* at me in bold. *Sometimes*, he said, *they even grow out of their allergies.*

I straightened up in my saddle and felt Jonah do the same behind me. That was when it occurred to me that I was a role model now. What a terrifying thought. I glanced down and saw that the waheela had done the same. His spine was a firm line, his head was high, and his steps were light. Well, light for a waheela. Giant frosty paw prints stretched out behind us on the cracked cement.

This isn’t the life I’m used to. Even I could hear the whine in my mental voice.

A chuckle like a warm breeze echoed in my head. *You’ll get used to it*, Steve said. Then he began to prance the way you see horses in parades do. *I think*, he said, tossing his mane like a woman in a hair commercial, *that you may even grow to like it.*

I probably will, I said, *but only if you stop acting like a stereotypical teenage girl. We’re* warriors, *damn it.*

And we look good while we’re doing it. He raised his knees even higher, his hooves cutting a staccato rhythm as we went. I rested the butt of my spear on the tip of my shoe, and threw my shoulders out. No sunset, and it smelled more like sweat, horse, and teenage boy than victory, but I could live with that. It wasn’t ideal. But sometimes you’ve just got to go with what you got and make it look good.

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Preview

Leon hauled himself up the ledge of Gaia's window, peered in, and tried to make out her bed in the shadows.

"Gaia?"

"She's not here," said a voice behind him.

Leon dropped to the ground and reached instinctively for his knife.

"It's just me," Peter said.

Leon located the quiet figure in the darkness and slid his knife back in his belt. Behind Peter, the forest was impenetrably dark, but the moonlight washed the yard beside the lodge with a cool, gray hue, and glinted on the water tower above.

"What are you doing here?" Leon said.

"Preventing a break-in, looks like," Peter said.

"Very nice," Leon said, brushing grit from his palms. "Where is she?"

"Out and about. You must want to see her bad to come in all this way unannounced."

"Where?" Leon repeated.

Peter jerked his thumb to his left. "Out on Bachsdatter's Island. Adele's having her baby."

Leon instinctively turned toward the marsh, as if he could penetrate the darkness all the way through the village and out across the water to where Gaia was now. He tried, unsuccessfully, to curb his disappointment, and started around the lodge.

"I thought Adele planned to come into the village for the end of her pregnancy," Leon said.

"Turns out she didn't," Peter said, following him. "Bachsdatter came in for Mlass Gaia this afternoon, and she took Mlady Maudie out with her, too."

"So she could be out there a while."

"I hear that's how childbirths go," Peter said.

"Did she bring Maya with her?" Leon asked.

"Maya's with Mlass Josephine."

Leon glanced up at the lodge windows, not exactly sure which one belonged to Josephine, but they were all dark and peaceful.

"Do you want to leave a message for Mlass Gaia?" Peter asked. "You're not having trouble with the crims, are you?"

"No. They're fine back on the trail," Leon said. He could smell mint as he passed the garden fence, and it made him oddly thirsty. "I left Malachai in charge. We have another week's worth of work to do before we come in again for more supplies."

"How's that third station shaping up?"

"It'll be ready by September," Leon said. "There's time yet."

"Are you sure it was safe to leave the crims?" Peter asked.

"What are they going to do? Run away?" Leon asked.

"Circle back and attack us."

"On foot? With you on patrol? Not likely."

They came around the last corner of the lodge and the commons opened up before them.

"Do you want to leave a message for Gaia or not?" Peter asked.

"No. I have something I need to deliver myself."

Leon touched his shirt pocket where he kept a red, woven bracelet he'd made, just to check that it was still there, ready like always. For days, he'd been obsessing about Gaia. He'd been missing the way she laughed late at night when she was too revved up to sleep. Usually, he could shake the craving to see her, but this time, maybe because the moon was practically full and bright enough to show the way, he'd finally given in. He knew every meter of the trail by now, even by night, so he'd come into Sylum to find her, to be with her for a couple hours.

Or just an hour, if that was all she had for him. He'd take whatever he could get. He grinned in the darkness. He shouldn't rub it in. He knew he shouldn't. Gaia for sure wouldn't want him to.

"Don't worry. It's nothing special," Leon lied.

Peter sent him a quick, hard look. His pace picked up. "You'd better be good to her."

"Or what?" Leon asked, amused. "You'll beat my brains in?"

"Close enough." Peter swung up onto his horse.

Leon *was* good to her. As good as he knew how. "Does she ever complain?"

"She barely talks to me," Peter said tightly. "How could she complain?"

That was exactly what Leon wanted to hear. He untied his horse.

"Where are you headed?" Peter asked.

"Down to the beach."

"What for?"

"To get a canoe." His horse sidestepped delicately in the dark grass and Leon settled him with a hand on his neck.

"You can't go out now," Peter said. "I've seen you in a canoe. You stink at sterning. And it's dark."

"So? It'll be light soon."

"Will you wait until then?"

Leon looked at him curiously. Peter couldn't possibly be concerned for his welfare. "What is this?"

"I'm on patrol. This is my job, remember? Village security."

"Some job," Leon said. "You didn't see me until I was practically in Gaia's window."

Peter shook his head. "I followed you since you first rode into the village."

"You knew I was here for Gaia," Leon said, annoyed. "You could have told me where she was."

"I could have," Peter agreed.

Leon hauled himself into the saddle.

"You're still not engaged, are you?" Peter asked.

"No."

"Eats at you, doesn't it?"

"Not at all." Leon's mount shifted heavily under him, and he kicked him into motion.

It ate at him, all right. It was a perpetual, burning, gnawing irritation. The few times he'd brought up marriage again, even vaguely, Gaia had withdrawn, and that was the last thing he wanted. It set them back by weeks, every time. Conversely, when he didn't mention it, she gradually let down some inner guard, and there was nothing as sweet as Gaia when she let herself love him.

Leon was vaguely aware that Peter had pulled up to ride alongside him.

"What are you doing?" Leon asked.

"Patrolling."

"Cut it out."

"Why? Am I bothering you?"

It was so juvenile, Leon didn't bother to answer. Peter pulled his horse slightly ahead as if he were in charge. Or more masterful.

What a tool, Leon thought.

They rode down the familiar main road, passing the quiet houses of the village, the closed shops and tavern. The more he thought about it, the more Leon hated being on a string. He wondered why it wasn't the other way around. Why was he always the one who was begging? He didn't actually beg. He never would. But it *felt* like that. Even now, he was the one riding in the middle of the night for hours, trying to get in her window, then taking up a paddle to cross a dark marsh, while she was delivering a baby, not thinking about him at all.

Of course she wasn't thinking about him. Only an egotistical jerk would expect her to think about him while she was tending a childbirth.

This timing was not going to work. He knew that, so why couldn't he give up?

They passed the willow and wound down toward the shore. Moonlight on the marsh made the water glow in silvery patches between the black hillocks of grasses. He was going to miss the marsh. Not much else about Sylum, but the marsh he'd miss.

Along the shore, a dozen small houses stood back from the water, with the beach sloping before them. Several piles of wood were accumulating for the next bonfire night, after the Thirty-Two games. Only two more now, before they left. Everything was in countdown mode. He rode over the sandy shore to the canoe rack and dismounted.

"Here," he said to Peter, holding out the reins. "Take care of my horse. I'll pick him up tomorrow from your barn."

"I'm not taking your horse," Peter said, swinging down from his own. He looped his reins over the rail, near a water trough.

Leon waved instinctively at a cloud of gathering mosquitoes. "I didn't ask you to go out there with me."

"You're right. You didn't. Take the end," Peter said, gesturing to a canoe on the rack.

"You're not coming," Leon said.

"Do you want to get there faster, or do you want the romance of a solo paddle?" Peter asked.

Leon took a brief look at the sky, which showed a faint edge of gray, and then he tied up his horse beside Peter's, took one end of the canoe, and

carried it down to the water.

"You're in the bow," Peter said, tossing him a paddle.

Leon recognized the satisfied taunt in Peter's tone. He'd learned enough to know a canoe moved more efficiently with a more experienced canoer in the stern. Peter would handle the subtleties of steering and leave Leon to supply the brute muscle in the bow. It was not a compliment.

"You paddle like a beauty queen. Lengthen your stroke," Peter said.

Leon bit his blade into the black water.

"More," Peter said.

"Why are you even coming?"

"You think I know? Paddle."

Leon reached again, farther, until he felt the difference in the canoe. Smoother. As long as they moved, the mosquitoes didn't settle along his neck and face, or at least not much. He peered ahead. A mist hovered over the dark water and clung to his arm hairs. Peter steered them effortlessly through the winding waterway, much faster than Leon could have done alone, calling occasionally to switch sides. Despite himself, Leon had to respect Peter's skill.

They came around a bend to a longer, open stretch, where chirps and croaks droned over the water.

"How's your family?" Leon asked, back over his shoulder.

"What do you mean? They're good."

"Has your father decided if he's coming with us or not?"

"He's not. My uncles aren't, either."

"Why not?" Leon asked.

"My dad says this is his home. He says he's known for a long time he might never have grandchildren. This is where his roots are. He wants to grow old here."

"Even if his sons move away?"

"Maybe he'll come later," Peter said. "That's what I'm hoping."

It drove Leon crazy, these people who refused to come on the exodus. Home was more about people than a place. Didn't they see what it would be like in Sylum once everyone else was gone? They'd be living in a ghost town. But the old matrarc's husband, Dominic, had gathered two hundred of the most traditional, bull-headed villagers around him, and they could not be persuaded.

Leon felt bad for Gaia, who kept trying to convince them and kept getting snarled in negotiations about what to take and what to leave behind. She wanted everyone, every single person on the exodus.

“Mlass Gaia thinks they’ll let us have water when we reach the Enclave. Do you?” Peter asked.

Leon thought ahead. Outside the walls of the Enclave, they’d find the opposite of what they were experiencing now, surrounded by gurgling water and the rich, loamy scent of the muskeg.

“I think we’ll have to fight for it,” Leon said.

“What with?” Peter asked.

“Our heads,” Leon said.

“Switch,” Peter said, and Leon lifted his paddle over to stroke on the other side.

When they reached Bachsdatter’s Island, Leon climbed out of the canoe, and with Peter, wordlessly turned it over on the rocky beach. A pearly, evanescent light muted all colors into gray, and the cliff rose before him, cold and inhospitable. Maybe this was a mistake. He hadn’t been to the island since the previous fall, when they’d gone to fetch baby Maya from the Bachsdatters.

What a mess he’d been back then, furious with Gaia, hating everything about Sylum. He’d wanted to hurt her and see her as miserably tortured as he’d been. He’d wanted to get to her through Maya since he couldn’t reach her himself, since she didn’t care enough about him directly for his opinions to matter to her. Punishing her for not loving him enough had been his single goal.

Real smart. But then, he wasn’t smart where Gaia was concerned. Was it that different now, really? He would never hurt her now, but still she didn’t care enough for him. He didn’t know if she ever would. He couldn’t understand this sick thing inside him that made him love her so intensely even when she kept holding back the last sliver of herself.

“Is there a problem?” Peter asked.

“No.”

Leon took to the path, leaving Peter to follow. At the top of the cliff, the homestead huddled, waiting. A few sheep scavenged between scrub and windswept trees, while the clotheslines cut a black web across the fresh orange glow of the sky.

Near the far edge of the cliff, the stone cottage clung to the ancient rock, and a row of square windows was yellow with lamplight. A woman's sharp cry cut through the early morning, and Leon slowed.

Childbirth. He couldn't think of a single place where he'd be less welcome. The clannish thing that happened to women around babies and blood, the way they all became so wise and exclusionary, was not for him.

He glanced back at Peter, who'd stopped by the garden gate.

"No way am I crashing that party," Peter said.

Leon laughed. "Afraid?"

"Mlady Adele hates me almost as much as she hates you." Peter turned back. "I'll check out the barn. Get me when you're ready to go."

Leon swiped a mosquito from his cheek and took the front steps slowly, listening. Only the soft wind hummed in the grass, and a couple of distant frogs bellowed from down in the marsh. He was about to knock when he had a better idea: spy.

He backtracked off the porch and walked quietly around the yard, peering in each window. To the left, toward the cliff, the windows revealed the living room where he had once confronted Gaia. The space was tidy, with a couch and chairs, books and dried flowers. A loom was taut with rows of white strings. An oil lamp illuminated a pile of neatly folded cloth diapers on a table, and at the sight, he remembered the early days of taking care of baby Maya, back when she was so tiny and frail, back when holding her was the closest he could get to Gaia.

He touched the pocket of his shirt again, over his heart. You don't propose for the last time until you're certain of the answer. Someday, certainly, she would say yes. He had to believe that. He just had to know when the time was right.

He turned and began around the stone house to the right, to where another window revealed a small bedroom, paneled in golden wood. The bed was angled in a way that he could see the bare feet of Mlady Adele, who lay on her side. Her husband Bachsdatter Luke was beside her, holding her hand, smiling tightly. Gaia was rubbing her back in deep, slow strokes, talking to her gently. When a soft moan came clearly through the opening of the window, Leon instinctively drew back, but he soon realized he was in no danger of being seen through the screen. Gaia was focused with undivided concentration on the mother before her.

Leon had never seen Gaia at work as a midwife, and he was hungry for every detail of her. Her face glowed with a serious, attentive expression. Her hands were gentle and sure. Her brown hair was tied back, but a strand of it curved loose along the line of her left cheek, like a smooth ribbon beside her scar. Gaia was alive in a way he'd never seen before.

She smiled now, and reached for her locket watch to check the time. "You're doing very well," she said, her voice just audible to him. "Now breathe again with me. Ready?" She took a few sample breaths herself, guiding Mlady Adele along.

"How's my baby?" Mlady Adele asked.

"Your baby's fine," Gaia said. "Your baby's in just the right position. Trust your body. You're doing a beautiful job."

"I should have come into the village, but I was having such cramps, and then the bleeding started. I was afraid to move."

"I know. You did the right thing staying here," Gaia said. "I would have told you the same thing."

"See? You're going to be all right, Adele," her husband said.

"But is it too early? Is this too early?" Mlady Adele asked.

"It's fine," Gaia said, in a smooth, reassuring voice. "Truly. You've got a little fighter in there with a good, strong heartbeat, and he or she is going to be fine."

Leon could see Mlady Adele relaxing, too, and then a sharp banging noise came from out of Leon's line of vision. Mlady Adele jumped and gave a new cry of pain.

"Sorry," said another woman's voice.

"I'm going to die!" Mlady Adele said. "I just know it. My cousin died with her second child. I told you. Remember? Her labor was just like this."

Gaia began soothing the mother all over again, her expression as reassuring and loving as before, but now Leon saw a subtle shift. Gaia was battling tension of her own. He was aware of it only because he knew her well, but it was there. Behind her, a tidy, blond woman moved forward carrying a metal bowl, and Leon caught sight of Mlady Maudie. She ran the lodge in the village with short-tempered efficiency, but here she looked out of place.

Gaia straightened. Her gaze was considering, thoughtful. She rested her hand lightly on the mother's shoulder. "Give me one minute, Adele," she said softly.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m stepping out for one minute, no more,” Gaia said. “You have Luke with you, and you can see me right through the door.” She pointed toward another door at the back of the room. “Okay?”

Adele mumbled something.

Leon plunged along outside the building. When he came to the corner and the screen door opened, Gaia wasn’t alone. She was drawing Mlady Maudie out to the back stoop. Leon stopped, bracing a hand on the stone wall.

Gaia took a look over her shoulder into the house again, then turned to Mlady Maudie. “I need you to focus,” she said. “You’re upsetting her.”

“I’m not suited to this. I don’t have the temperament,” Mlady Maudie said. “I told you I didn’t.”

“I don’t care if you’re not naturally good at it,” Gaia said sharply. “When I’m gone, there’ll be nobody else. You need to practice.”

“I can’t!” Mlady Maudie said. “I do everything wrong. I don’t have the patience. You said yourself I’m upsetting her.”

“Because you’re not trying enough,” Gaia argued.

“I *am* trying. But the closer I get to her, the worse she gets. Just let me leave.”

Gaia was still for a moment, her expression fierce, calculating.

“If you leave, it will be better,” Gaia said. “But only for Adele. For every mother who comes after, once I’m gone, it will be worse because you’ll have that much less experience.” Gaia’s startled gaze flicked toward Leon, and she turned to face him. “Who’s there?” she demanded.

Leon jumped, then stepped forward. He’d hoped Gaia would be happy to see him, but he was wrong. She barely seemed to register who he was. Unsmiling, she slowly lifted a hand to her necklace. Moans came from the doorway behind them. Gaia faced Mlady Maudie again.

“You will stay,” Gaia said. “You will be quiet, and listen, and watch. Leon, take off your boots and come in.”

Terror rooted Leon to the ground. She couldn’t be serious. Already she was back inside, and as the screen door closed, he stared at it in disbelief.

Mlady Maudie laughed briefly. “She’s terrifying, isn’t she?”

“Are you staying?” Leon said.

“After that? What choice do I have?”

“What does she expect me to do?” he asked.

“How do I know?”

He could hear Gaia’s soothing voice again, and a gasping noise from the mother on the bed. He shucked off his boots, propped his hat on a peg, pulled open the screen door, and cautiously entered the bedroom.

Soft light glowed from the globe of an oil lamp on the table, and a second lamp had been placed near the foot of the bed on a chair. On a narrow shelf, a wooden candelabra with three lit flames silently dripped wax, as if night had been prolonged in this room and dawn were still hours away.

Adele’s frizzy, superfine hair was drawn back in a ponytail, and spidery bruises ringed her eyes, giving her an unearthly, fragile appearance. With one hand, she gripped the edge of the bed, and with the other, she held tightly to Gaia as she breathed a series of forced, measured breaths. Her forehead crumpled. She closed her eyes, strained with pressure for a moment, and then collapsed backward again.

“Good,” Gaia said. “That was so good. Not much longer now.”

Stunned, Leon stared at the hugeness of Adele’s belly. Her gown was hitched up, leaving her heavy, pale legs bare. Normally he would have instinctively looked away, but now, instead, some uneasy form of compassion drew him quietly nearer.

“What can I do?” he asked, his voice low.

Gaia glanced up, her eyes a quick flash of relief. “Wash your hands,” she said, and nodded to a basin on the dresser. “Over there. You can help support her.”

Leon met the startled gaze of Adele’s husband, but before Bachsdatter could say anything, Leon rolled back his sleeves and began to wash. Gaia kept up her steady, reassuring talk, repeatedly telling Adele how well she was doing. Mlady Maudie silently passed Leon a towel, and when he turned, Bachsdatter, a compact, weathered man with a gray beard and sunken eyes, was focused again on his wife.

Leon took that as acceptance enough.

“I feel another one coming,” Adele said, her voice rising in urgency. She reached for Gaia.

“Support her back,” Gaia said to Leon. “Here, on the other side.”

He shifted around, opposite to Bachsdatter, and following the other man, he set his hands firmly behind the mother’s back. Adele’s gown was clammy with sweat, and for an instant he thought she would recoil at his

touch, but Adele was concentrating inwardly, and he wasn't certain she even realized he was there. He braced his hand to hold her, and when the next contraction was over, he looked to Gaia, wondering if he should let Adele back down.

"So good," she said to Adele. "Your baby's close now. You're doing so beautifully."

"It hurts," Adele said, her eyes closed. "It hurts my back."

"Do you want to try squatting? It might help," Gaia said. "We can help you up."

Adele nodded, and with a look to coordinate with Bachsdatter, Leon gripped beneath Adele's left shoulder and helped her into a squatting position.

"Do you want to move to the floor? It's firmer," Gaia said.

"No. I'm good here," Adele said. "Like this. Just like this."

Gaia rearranged a clean cloth beneath her. Leon kept expecting something fast, a primal bursting or some sort of fanfare or agony, but Adele only strained and then drooped in a cycle that seemed to go on forever at its own unhurried pace.

"That was a good one," Gaia said, after another round. "Do you feel like pushing? I can see your baby now, Adele. The head's right there. Your baby's coming."

Leon shifted his grip for a more comfortable hold, gentle and firm, and steadied Adele's back. He could hardly believe he was doing this. He glanced over at Bachsdatter, who was holding Adele's hand and supporting her from the other side. Bachsdatter made a soft joke. Though he looked worn with care, a protective gentleness about him did something strange to Leon inside. He looked at Gaia again, wondering at her connection with these people, and at the powerful connection between Adele and her husband.

And then he felt it silently including him, too.

A faint breeze stirred through the room.

Gaia's voice was still going, a stream of encouragement. "That's right, Adele. Your baby's coming. That's the head now! You've done so well. Just a little more. Almost there." She was reaching down below Adele, who was sagging again.

The breath of the room seemed to hover, waiting, ready. Then Adele strained again, and ground out a pained moan.

“That’s it!” Gaia said. “Oh, Adele, he’s here. He’s beautiful!”

The woman in Leon’s arms leaned slowly backward, her mouth wide and body limp. “Let me see him,” she said, but already Gaia was passing the baby up over Adele’s belly, trailing the umbilical cord. It was the knobbiest, skinniest baby Leon had ever seen, all slippery knees and elbows, and a dark color he’d never known existed. Gaia wrapped a clean cloth around the little body and rubbed him with surprising vigor, right on top of Adele. Then, as Adele held the infant, Gaia used a bit of reed to suck out his mouth and nose, and an instant later the baby gave out a cry.

Leon laughed, and everyone else was smiling, too. Bachsdatter was openly crying. Mlady Maudie kept congratulating everyone loudly. Gaia was talking in a joyful, delighted stream. She was moving, too, cleaning up between Adele’s legs. Leon couldn’t keep his eyes off the little person who had shown up. He was pinkening now, and he was so small. Leon knew, of course, that he’d existed inside Adele, but now he was born. He was his own complete little guy, a person who’d never existed outside before.

“Thank you, Gaia,” Adele said. “Oh, thank you. He’s perfect.”

“He is. He’s incredible. You’re incredible. But we’re not done yet,” Gaia said. “There’s the afterbirth. Catch your breath for a minute while you can. That’s coming, too. Okay? Let me do the cord.”

Smiling, Adele lifted her head to take in the room, and Leon felt her gaze settle on him.

“Who’s this?” Adele asked in surprise.

Leon drew back. He watched Adele’s mottled face. She was still happy, but confused, and suddenly her confusion changed to shock.

“You!” Adele said. “What are you doing here?” She clutched desperately at her newborn. “You stole our baby girl!” she cried. “Get out!”

“It’s just Leon,” Gaia said. “I told you about him. He came to help me. To help you.”

“Get out!” Adele shrieked again. She started to shiver visibly and reached for her husband. “Luke! He’s here! He can’t steal our baby!”

Leon backed toward the door. He looked down at his hands, wondering when they’d picked up traces of blood. His shirt had streaks of it, too. Adele’s eyes flashed with pain, and in panic, she turned toward Gaia again.

“Help me! Gaia!” she said.

“You’re all right,” Gaia said soothingly. “Here. You’re fine. I’ve got you. He’s going. He was just here to help, but he’s going.”

Adele hunched into another contraction, and Bachsdatter slid the baby from her arms. Without another look at Leon, Gaia began to work over Adele again. Still in shock, Leon glanced up at Mlady Maudie. Her face was bloodless, her lips tight.

"You should go," she said quietly.

With one more step, he was outside and the screen door closed behind him.

How quickly it had changed. How fast. He'd been part of them. He'd been with them for the miracle of a birth. It was the most extraordinary thing he'd ever seen, and he'd been part of it.

Now he wasn't.

He was the enemy. He stared down at his hands. It was full light now. Sunlight was slanting across the top of the island, and a light breeze was stirring the leaves of the apple trees. He tried to breathe, and found his chest was tight with pain.

"You all right?" Peter asked.

Leon turned to find him in a sturdy chair, tipped back against the wall of the stone barn, near a big, open doorway.

Leon looked down at himself again. He stood in his gray socks. His boots were waiting for him on the stoop, his hat on the peg. His brain still wasn't processing properly.

Peter brought down the front legs of his chair with a thud in the dirt. "There's a pump over here," he said. "Here. Let me."

Peter strode to an old pump with chipped black paint and began working it. Squeaks and sharp bangs came from the metal, and then the chugging gush of the first water. Leon pushed into his boots before going near. He automatically put his hands in the cold stream, rubbing them clean, and the water seemed to wake him from a trance. A cold, quiet steadiness took its place.

"I've got it," Leon said, his voice low. Taking the handle, he got a big rush going, and then stuck his head under the pump, gasping at the cold of the fresh water. He took a long drink, relishing the sweetness down his dry throat. Then he stripped off his shirt and jacked the handle again. He was about to put the fabric under the pump when he remembered the bracelet in the pocket. Slowly, he plucked it out and slipped it into his trousers pocket. Then he washed his shirt, wringing it out twice before he snapped it in the air.

He glanced back at the house.

“I’m guessing it was a boy,” Peter said.

“Yeah.”

“You okay?”

Leon looked at Peter again. He’d waited by the barn. He hadn’t just supported a woman through the final hour of her labor or seen a baby being born. He hadn’t been taken in and spit back out.

Leon nodded, but he wasn’t okay. “I just—” He stopped. The last thing he needed right now was a witness.

He plucked at his wet shirt, then looked at the laundry line. He strode over, dug a couple clothespins out of the little basket, and hung up his shirt in the dry wind. Then he sat in Peter’s chair and tipped it back against the barn again, closing his eyes as his face angled upward into the sunshine.

They didn’t want him. Of course Mlady Adele and Bachsdatter didn’t want him. But Gaia did. She hadn’t deliberately jerked him around. He ought to get back to the crims. He’d been insane to think he could propose again. He had work to do. But he was tired, too. So tired.

It couldn’t have been too much later that he heard her voice.

“Leon,” she said, and he felt a soft touch on his knee.

He opened his eyes to the brightness.

“You were a great help,” she said.

“It was nothing,” he said.

“Luke wants to thank you.”

Mlady Adele, obviously, did not.

Leon shook his head. “No, that’s all right.”

“*I* want to thank you,” Gaia said.

He smiled slightly. “You’re welcome.”

He leveled the chair again, and looked around for Peter. He was across the way, talking to Mlady Maudie and Bachsdatter Luke, who was holding his new son.

“You’re getting sunburned,” Gaia said, and he saw she was holding his shirt and hat.

He pressed a couple fingers to his chest and then lifted them away to see the ghost marks fade to a ruddy hue. It figured.

“Why did you come?” Gaia asked, passing over his shirt.

“I wanted to see you,” he said.

“That’s all? No problem with the crims or anything?”

It seemed like so long ago that he'd left the crims to come into the village to find her. He fingered his shirt, which was all but dry. "No. Just you."

"You're awfully untalkative for a guy who came all this way to see me," she said.

He glanced up again, seeing the concern in her eyes when she smiled at him. His loneliness began to thaw.

"You were amazing in there, you know," he said.

She shook her head, turning his hat in her hands. "I hope I didn't boss you around too much. I can get a little single-minded."

"Hardly at all. 'Take yer boots off and git yerself in here,'" he drawled.

Gaia laughed. "No!"

"Yes," he said.

"I'm sorry. I really was so glad when you showed up. I was ready to strangle Mlady Maudie. You were just perfect. So supportive and gentle."

"Okay, that's enough."

"But really, Leon. I'm so glad you were there. I always wished I could have you with me at a childbirth."

He squinted up at her. She seemed to mean it. He wondered if she even realized he'd been kicked out. She nodded toward the shirt in his hands.

"Please put your shirt on," she said.

He pulled it over his head, checking the buttons. "Better?"

She looked exhausted, and happy, and too bighearted to believe. So why did he still feel anguished? He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap.

"Hey!" She laughed, hugging an arm around him.

He snuggled his nose in her hair and kissed her neck. *Mine*, he thought.

"They'll see," she muttered.

They'd better. "Let them. It's legal."

She laughed again and quickly kissed him. Finally.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Something's wrong. With you. It was Adele, wasn't it?"

Leon could feel Gaia's fingertips rest lightly at the base of his throat, cool and soothing. He let his gaze settle on the pump. "She couldn't help it," he said.

“I’m sorry,” Gaia said softly. “She really couldn’t, but I’m so sorry. You were part of it. You felt that, didn’t you?”

He did. He’d felt it. He wanted more of it, without the sting afterward.

“Babies,” she said with a sigh. And then, “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Leon.”

And there it was. That unlocking inside him. That thing only she could do to him. That was why he had come. Why he would always come.

Marry me, he thought.

She settled nearer, adjusting her arm around his neck. He very slowly, carefully tipped the chair back again. At first, he felt her startled grip, but then she let out a low, trusting laugh, and rested her head next to his. Her necklace bumped against his neck.

“Are we napping?” she asked.

“For a little,” he said.

He wasn’t napping. He concentrated every cell of his body on memorizing the weight of her against him, and the smell of her hair in the sun. His arms measured the slender curve of her torso. His fingers separated out a single strand of her hair. Her breathing slowed, easing, while his watchful heart chugged on, stupid and hungry, and the red bracelet stayed in his pocket.

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Some are marked with a code that will determine the future.
One carries a scar that will unravel the past.

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Fierce Reads

Chapter 1
The Baby Quota

IN THE DIM HOVEL, the mother clenched her body into one final, straining push, and the baby slithered out into Gaia's ready hands.

"Good job," Gaia said. "Wonderful. It's a girl."

The baby cried indignantly, and Gaia breathed a sigh of relief as she checked for toes and fingers and a perfect back. It was a good baby, healthy and well formed, if small. Gaia wrapped the child in a blanket, then held the bundle toward the flickering firelight for the exhausted mother to see.

Gaia wished her own mother were there to help, especially with managing the afterbirth and the baby. She knew, normally, she wasn't supposed to give the baby to the mother to hold, not even for an instant, but now the mother was reaching and Gaia didn't have enough hands.

"Please," the young woman whispered. Her fingers beckoned tenderly.

The baby's cries subsided, and Gaia passed her over. She tried not to listen to the mother's gentle, cooing noises as she cleaned up between her legs, moving gently and efficiently as her mother had taught her. She was excited and a little proud. This was her first delivery, and it was an unassisted delivery, too. She had helped her mother many times, and she'd known for years that she would be a midwife, but now it was finally real.

Almost finished. Turning to her satchel, she drew out the small teakettle and two cups that her mother had given her for her sixteenth birthday, only a month ago. By the light of the coals, she poured water from a bottle into the kettle. She stoked up the fire, seeing the burst of yellow light gleam over the mother with her small, quiet bundle.

"You did well," Gaia said. "How many is this for you again? Did you say four?"

"She's my first," the woman said, her voice warm with awed pleasure.

"What?"

The woman’s eyes gleamed briefly as she looked toward Gaia, and she smiled. In a shy, self-conscious gesture, she smoothed a sweat-damped curl back around her ear. “I didn’t tell you before. I was afraid you wouldn’t stay.”

Gaia sat down slowly beside the fire, set the kettle on the metal rod, and swiveled it over the fire to warm.

First labors were hardest, the most risky, and although this one had progressed smoothly, Gaia knew they’d been lucky. Only an experienced midwife should have tended this woman, not only for the sake of the mother and child’s health, but for what would come next.

“I would have stayed,” Gaia said softly, “but only because there’s nobody else to come. My mother was already gone to another birth.”

The mother hardly seemed to hear. “Isn’t she beautiful?” she murmured. “And she’s mine. I get to keep her.”

Oh, no, Gaia thought. Her pleasure and pride evaporated, and she wished now, more than ever, that her mother were there. Or even Old Meg. Or anybody, for that matter.

Gaia opened her satchel and took out a new needle and a little bottle of brown ink. She shook the tin of tea over the kettle to drop in some flakes. The faint aroma slowly infused the room with a redolent fragrance, and the mother smiled again in a weary, relaxed way.

“I know we’ve never talked,” the mother said. “But I’ve seen you and your mother coming and going at the quadrangle, and up to the wall. Everyone says you’ll be as great a midwife as your mother, and now I can say it’s true.”

“Do you have a husband? A mother?” Gaia asked.

“No. Not living.”

“Who was the boy you sent for me? A brother?”

“No. A kid who was passing in the street.”

“So you have no one?”

“Not anymore. Now I have my baby, my Priscilla.”

It’s a bad name, Gaia thought. And what was worse, it wouldn’t matter because it wouldn’t last. Gaia dropped a pinch of motherwort into the mother’s teacup, and then silently poured tea into the two cups, trying to think how best to do this. She let her hair fall forward, shielding the left side of her face, while she moved the empty teakettle, still warm, into her satchel.

“Here,” she said, handing the cup laced with motherwort toward the young woman on the bed and smoothly removing the baby from beside her.

“What are you doing?” the mother asked.

“Just drink. It will help with the pain.” Gaia took a sip from her own cup as an example.

“I don’t feel much anymore. Just a little sleepy.”

“That’s good,” Gaia said, setting her cup back by the hearth.

Quietly, she packed her gear and watched as the mother’s eyelids grew heavier. She unwrapped the baby’s legs to gently pull one foot out, and then she set the baby on a blanket on the floor, near the fireplace. The baby’s eyes opened and flickered toward the flames: dark, murky eyes. It was impossible to tell what color they might eventually be. Gaia sopped a bit of clean rag into her cup of tea, absorbing the last hot liquid, and then wiped it over the ankle, cleaning it. She dipped the needle in the brown ink, held it briefly to the light, and then, swiftly, as she had done before under her mother’s guidance, she pressed the pin into the baby’s ankle in four rapid pricks. The child screamed.

“What are you doing?” the mother demanded, now fully awake.

Gaia wrapped the birthmarked baby again and cradled her firmly in one arm. She slid the teacup, needle, and ink into her satchel. Then she stepped forward and took the second teacup from beside the mother. She lifted her satchel.

“No!” the mother cried. “You can’t! It’s April twenty-first! Nobody ever advances a baby this late in the month.”

“It’s not how late the date is,” Gaia said quietly. “It’s the first three babies each month.”

“But you must have delivered half a dozen by now,” the woman shrieked, rising. She struggled to shift her legs to the side of the bed.

Gaia took a step backward, steeling herself to be strong. “My *mother* delivered those. This is my first,” she said. “It’s the first three babies for each midwife.”

The mother stared at her, shock and horror shifting across her face. “You can’t,” she whispered. “You can’t take my baby. She’s mine.”

“I have to,” Gaia said, backing away. “I’m sorry.”

“But you can’t,” the woman gasped.

“You’ll have others. You’ll get to keep some. I promise.”

“Please,” the mother begged. “Not this one. Not my only. What have I done?”

“I’m sorry,” Gaia repeated. She’d reached the door now. She saw she’d left her tin of tea next to the fireplace, but it was too late to go back for it now. “Your baby will be well cared for,” she said, using the phrases she’d learned. “You’ve provided a great service to the Enclave, and you will be compensated.”

“No! Tell them to keep their filthy compensation! I want my baby.”

The mother lunged across the room, but Gaia had expected this, and in an instant she was out of the house and moving swiftly down the dark alleyway. At the second corner, she had to stop because she was shaking so hard she was afraid she’d drop everything. The newborn made a lonely, anxious noise, and Gaia hitched her satchel more securely over her right shoulder so that she could pat the little bundle with her trembling fingers.

“Hush,” she murmured.

From far behind her she heard a door open, and then a distant, wild keening noise. “Please! Gaia!” the voice called, and Gaia’s heart lurched.

She sniffed back hard and turned to face the hill. This was far worse than she’d imagined it could be. Though her ears remained primed, listening for another cry in the night, she started forward again and trod rapidly up the hill toward the Enclave. The moon cast a blue light on the dark, wood and stone buildings around her, and once her foot caught against a rock. In contrast to the urgency that drove her forward, a hollow, sleepy silence filled the air. She’d made this trip many times before on her mother’s behalf, but until tonight, it had never seemed like such a long journey. She knew the baby would be fine, even better than fine. She knew the mother would have others. More than anything, she knew it was the law that she turn this baby over and that if she didn’t, her own life and that of the mother were forfeit.

She knew all of this, but for a moment, she wished it weren’t so. In violation of everything she’d been taught, she wished she could take this baby back to her mother and tell her, “Here, take little Priscilla. Head into the wasteland and never come back.”

She turned the last corner, and there was the light over the arching doors of the south gate, a single, gleaming bulb in a lantern of mirrored glass that reflected the illumination onto the doors and hard-packed ground. Two guards in black uniforms stood before the two massive wooden doors. She

let her hair slide forward, covering her left cheek, and instinctively turned to keep that side of her face in shadow.

"If it isn't a little delivery," the taller guard said. He took off his wide-brimmed hat with a flourish and wedged it under an elbow. "Bringing us one of your mom's babies?"

Gaia walked forward slowly, her heart thudding against her ribs. She had to pause to catch her breath. She could almost hear the plaintive wail of the mother behind her, and Gaia feared that she was following behind on her pale, shaky legs. A bird flew overhead with a quick burst of wings. Gaia took another step forward, into the reassuring light of the lantern.

"It's my own," Gaia said. "My first."

"Is that right?" the second guard said, sounding impressed.

"Unassisted," she said, unable to resist a glimmer of pride.

She put a finger on the blanket under the infant's chin, taking a satisfied look at the even features, the little, perfect, convex dip in the skin above her upper lip. The great gate was opening, and she glanced up to see a white-clad woman approaching. She was short, with the healthy girth of someone who ate well. Her face was mature, capable, and if Gaia was correct, eager. Gaia didn't recognize her, but she'd seen others from the Nursery like her before.

"Is the baby perfect?" the woman asked, coming forward.

Gaia nodded. "I didn't have time to clean her," she apologized. "I had no assistant."

"This was your first delivery, then? There wasn't any problem with the mother, was there?"

Gaia hesitated. "No," she said. "She was glad to serve the Enclave."

"And when was the birth?"

Gaia pulled at the chain around her neck and pulled her locket watch out from the neckline of her dress. "Forty-three minutes ago."

"Excellent," the woman said. "You must remember to verify the mother's name and address in the quadrangle tomorrow morning to be sure she gets her compensation."

"I will," Gaia said, slipping the watch back into her dress.

The woman started to reach for the baby, but then her gaze flicked up to Gaia and she paused. "Let me see your face, child," the woman said gently.

Gaia lifted her chin slightly and reluctantly smoothed her hair behind her left ear. She turned fully into the light of the lamp that shone over the

great gate. As if their sightlines were made of fine, invisible arrows, the gaze of six eyes zeroed in on her scar and lingered there in speechless curiosity. She forced herself to stay still and bear their scrutiny.

The taller guard cleared his throat and brought his fist to his lips in a little cough.

“You’ve done well, Gaia Stone,” the woman said finally, giving her a wise smile. “Your mother will be proud.”

“Thank you, Masister,” Gaia said.

“I’m Masister Khol. Say hello to her for me.”

“I will, Masister.”

Gaia let the hair fall free from behind her left ear again. It didn’t surprise her that the Enclave woman knew her name. Too often before, Gaia had met someone for the first time only to discover they’d already heard of her, Bonnie and Jasper Stone’s daughter, the one with the burned face. The recognition no longer surprised her, but she didn’t much like it. Masister Khol was holding out her hands in an expectant manner, and Gaia gently leaned the infant away from the warmth of her left side to pass her carefully over. For a moment, her palms felt light, empty, and cold.

“She’s called Priscilla,” Gaia said.

Masister Khol looked at her curiously. “Thank you. That’s good to know,” she said.

“You’re going to have a busy time ahead,” the tall soldier said. “And what, you’re only seventeen, isn’t that right?”

“Sixteen,” Gaia said.

She felt suddenly, inexplicably ill, like she might throw up. She gave a quick smile, switched her satchel to her other shoulder, and turned.

“Good-bye,” Masister Khol said. “I’ll send your compensation to your mother’s place in Western Sector Three, shall I?”

“Yes,” Gaia called. She was already walking down the hill again, her legs not quite steady. She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them and touched her fingers against the dim building beside her for balance.

The moon’s light seemed less powerful now than it had before she stepped into the glow of the lantern, and blink as she might, she could not instantly make her eyes adjust to the darkness. She had to stand, waiting, just around the corner from the gate with its gleaming lantern. In the stillness, she could hear crying from somewhere near, a soft, lonely crying. Her heart stopped. For a moment she was certain that Priscilla’s mother was

close by in the shadows, ready to plead with her again, or accuse her. But no one appeared, and in another moment, when the crying subsided, Gaia was able to continue down the hill, away from the wall, toward home.

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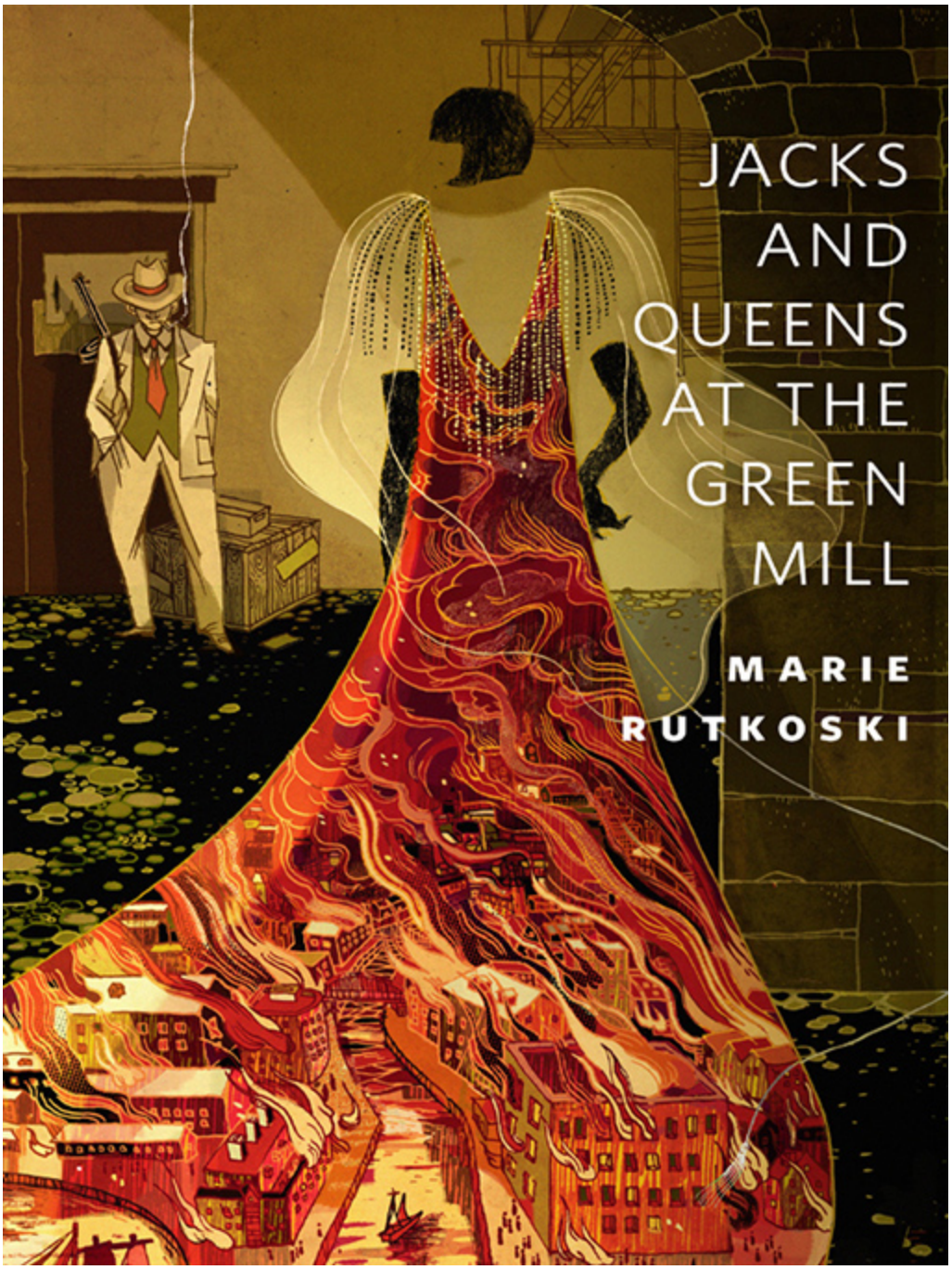
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Contents

Begin Reading

Pathetic.

Zephyr cast a glance over the Green Mill Lounge's sunken garden, at the sweat-dazzled ladies in their thin dresses leaning on men who called for more buckets of champagne. The Chicago night was fuzzy with heat.

Not that Zephyr felt it. That would require skin. It was a good thing she didn't have any at the moment. If she had, she would have been sweltering along with the humans. If she had a face, her expression would have shown what she thought of them.

Their parents or grandparents had burned Chicago down in 1874. Now, five decades later, their reborn city was an ugly thing, with straight streets and right angles, full of humans who drank and laughed and had no idea that they were living their lives in a space hollowed out by the murder of a people better than them in every way, in every thought and intention.

Namely, creatures like herself.

Zephyr floated, invisible, into an alleyway snaking out of the club's side entrance. She was nothing, a wisp of air.

Then her body molded into being and she became a girl.

Zephyr felt the weight of her flesh settle on the branch-and-twig network of bones. Her short black hair, cropped in this world's style, swished against her bare neck. She ran fingers over the flat chest of her dress, its tiny black beads sprayed like caviar across the square neckline and dripping in fringes from her shoulders. Zephyr had dressed carefully for this mission. The humans would take her for one of their own. When she walked into the club, no one would give her a second glance.

"Hell-*lo*," said a voice.

Or perhaps someone would.

A boy blocked the club's side entrance. He looked about her age, no more than twenty years old. His body was long, rangy, his stance somehow naturally dishonest, alive with the energy of someone who couldn't be trusted, but also couldn't be blamed for it, because it was easy to guess from the way he constantly shifted his weight that he couldn't quite trust himself either.

But it was his face that stopped Zephyr cold.

Only for a moment. Then she came closer. She walked straight up to him.

Once, Zephyr's mother had tried to explain to her how an alternate world happened. She had described the sensation: a shiver along the skin of reality, then a jolt, a loss of balance. Every Shade had felt it. On October 8, 1874, the Shades of Chicago looked around at their whole city, at the sheer autumn sky, and didn't see anything wrong. Everything seemed the same. But they felt half of themselves die. Some part of them blazed up in pain and blew away in ash. They didn't understand, then, what had happened. They didn't know that, in *this* world, their old world, the one where Zephyr faced the boy, humans had led a massacre of the Shades. They had burned Shades at stakes lit throughout the city.

In *this* world, which they called the Alter, Zephyr's mother had died along with every other Shade.

In their new world, the one into which Zephyr had been born, her mother was alive.

But it felt, her mother said, as if she lived with the ghost of her dead self. As if she were her own haunting.

Zephyr stared at the boy staring at her, and thought that maybe he understood how her mother felt.

He was hideous.

Half of his face was a twist of scar tissue. One eye was almost hooded by a patch of skin, and his mouth dragged up to the left in a permanent sneer.

He whistled. It must have been hard work, whistling with that mouth. But the sound pierced low and true. "You look like Louise Brooks," he said.

She frowned.

"The movie star," he clarified.

She knew what movies were. Her Chicago didn't have them, but the Alter did. They were all the rage here, mirages of light and dark, faces flitting across the screen like shadows cast by bird wings. Zephyr had even watched one. She had not been impressed.

And the truth was, she found the boy's assessment a bit insulting. She wasn't *trying* to look like a movie star. She had researched the persona she was trying to achieve. It was 1926, and she knew what stylish girls here were supposed to be. "I'm a flipper," she informed him.

The other half of his mouth lifted. "Do you mean *flapper*?"

This word made no more sense than the other one. It only served to annoy her.

He kept smiling his warped smile.

But what he called her didn't matter. His disfigurement didn't matter. It had made her forget her goal, but would do so no longer.

She moved to brush past him.

He slid a flat-palmed hand into her path. She stopped, drew back. The thought of a human touching her made Zephyr's skin crawl.

"Sorry," he said. "The boss is inside. When he's in the Green Mill, no one goes out, no one goes in."

It was only then that Zephyr noticed the gun slung from his shoulder. This kind of gun had a name as well as a reputation: the Chicago Typewriter, some people in the Alter called it, or the Chicago Style. A machine gun, one that could kill scores of humans in one sweep. It was what Zephyr wanted, and she couldn't believe she hadn't seen before that he carried it, even if the barrel was black, even if his clothes were dark, even if the alley was darker.

It was that face. His face had startled her, kept her from seeing more important things. Like the way his hands weren't on the gun. It hung loose from its shoulder strap.

"You're a rather poor guard, aren't you?" She nodded at the dangling gun.

His hands snapped to it, gripped the stock. "I got distracted."

"By my movie star beauty?" She gave him a snide smile full of teeth.

"I saw you," he muttered, chin down but eyes up, never leaving hers. "I saw you appear."

Foolish, *stupid*. Why had Zephyr been so cursory, why had she assumed the alleyway was empty before she had stepped into her body? And now…

"I know what you are," he said.

"A ghost." The word came out flat. A ghost was what people in the Alter always believed they'd witnessed when they happened to see a Shade flicker in or out of sight.

He shook his head. "A Shadow."

Close enough. Too close.

"My grandda told me about your kind," he said.

"Oh?" Her voice rode high. This was why Zephyr didn't like living in her body. She wasn't used to it. It appalled her, the way the flesh could

betray feelings better left unveiled, such as tension. “Then you must know that a bullet won’t touch me, and that you can’t stop me from going through that door.” She could disappear, drift right through it.

He shrugged. “I know there’s a reason you haven’t already.”

Zephyr’s eyes narrowed. Her former plan winked out like a faraway star. A new one began to gleam. Suddenly, her idea of waltzing into the Alter’s most dangerous nightclub and walking out with a machine gun seemed less fun and dramatic, more tiresome. Only small things in contact with her body would vanish with her. She’d have to stay solid to leave the club with a gun.

The boy with the wrecked face presented an easier option—one that was enjoyable, too, in its way.

“Give me the gun,” she said.

He laughed.

“Do it,” she said, “or I’ll vanish, float the ghost of my fist into your chest, and come alive inside your body. I’ll burst your heart into pulp.”

He continued to smile. “You’re not as scary as my boss. I’m one of his bodyguards. If he comes out and sees I’m missing my gun, I’ll wish you’d killed me.”

Her body went still. The stillness had a waiting quality, and when Zephyr realized that, she understood that she was hesitating.

He noticed. And she noticed that he wasn’t really afraid of her, which meant either that his grandfather hadn’t informed him fully about Shades or that this boy was made of stern-enough stuff.

And maybe—she thought, staring at his rippled features again—he had to be.

“You’re fair,” he said quietly.

“Fair?” She wasn’t sure what he was driving at.

“Did you know that, long ago, ‘fair’ meant both ‘beautiful’ and ‘just’? Isn’t that nice, the thought that justice and beauty were once twins?”

“You’re an odd sort of gangster, to be concerned with justice and words.”

“You’re an odd sort of anything. But, I hope, you’re also fair.” A hand pulled a deck of cards from his suit pocket. “Play me for the gun.”

The corner of Zephyr’s mouth twitched. How strange it was, to have flesh, and for it to explain her emotions to her.

Amused. She was amused. “What game?”

“My favorite. Black Jack. Know it?”

As if they didn’t play cards in her world!

Though she wasn’t quite sure if he knew about her world, even if he knew about Shades—unusual enough. The memory of them was supposed to have been obliterated in the Alter after the Great Chicago Fire, which is what humans called the genocide of her people.

“Whoever gets closest to twenty-one wins,” Zephyr said sharply. His expression nettled her. It was patient, ready for anything she might say. That made her impatient, and ready for nothing. “Face cards are worth ten. Aces are one or eleven, player’s choice. Twos are worth two, threes are worth three…”

“And don’t go over twenty-one, girl, or you’ll lose.”

Her body decided before her mind did. Zephyr took the cards. After the barest of pauses, during which she wondered what she was doing, and how the evening had taken the shape of this alleyway, this boy, these red-backed cards, Zephyr began inspecting them for folded edges, pinpricks, the signs of a marked deck.

“It’s clean,” he said.

She snorted, and kept shuffling.

“What does it feel like?” he said abruptly. “To go from nothing at all to *that*?” He waved a hand at her entire body.

It sounded less like a question and more like flirtation. It sounded like he needed to be reminded of some basic boundaries, such as the kind between predator and prey. “And how did it feel, to go from what you were to *that*?” She pointed at his face.

He blinked. That small movement sent a dart of feeling into Zephyr. It took a moment for her to recognize it as guilt. She folded her arms defensively, and a card from the deck in one hand fell to the pavement. “Well,” she said, “I’m sure a criminal can do a million things to deserve whatever happened to you.”

He bent to retrieve the card. “I’m not sure,” he said slowly, straightening, brushing the dirt from the two of diamonds. “I’m not sure what a ten-year-old kid can do to deserve getting his face held flat against a hot stove.”

Zephyr took the card from him. She slipped it back into the pack, and was silent. Then she said, “When I step into my body, it feels like water

before it hardens into ice. Like silk before it's stretched and stitched onto a wire frame and called a lampshade."

"Silk and ice," he said, running the words together so that they sounded like *silken ice*. "That's you, all right."

She packed the deck tight and hard into his outstretched hand. "Deal, guttersnipe."

He cut the deck, arced the cards between his fingers. "Joe," he said. "My name's Joe." He tossed a three of clubs face up at her sharp-toed shoes.

"Again," she said.

Another card: the six of hearts.

"Again."

His hands didn't move. "The polite thing," he said, "would be to tell me your name."

"Again," she snarled.

He shifted his weight, lifted his shoulder in what was not quite a shrug, just a restless movement. "What's the harm?"

Zephyr saw, then, that he had guessed her decision that whatever the outcome of the game, he wouldn't be alive much longer—one way or another. "Fine," she said. "I'm Zephyr."

"Ah, the west wind. The gentle one."

"It's just a name. A family name. Everyone in my family is named after a wind, or a creature of the air. My cousins have the names of stars. Some families like forest names." She assured herself that she was telling him this to encourage the suspicion of his doom, because why would she tell him anything about her life, unless she knew his wouldn't last much longer?

Why would she say anything?

He dealt another card. The jack of spades. "That makes nineteen for you."

"I can count."

"Will you stay?"

She glanced at him.

"Will you hold?" he said. "Or d'you want another card?"

Her heart beat. Zephyr was surprisingly nervous about the conclusion of a game whose outcome she had already decided didn't matter. That heartbeat ratcheted into recklessness. "Another."

An ace.

The breath came out of him slowly. “That makes twenty.”

“I’ll stay.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I bet you will.”

He dealt himself a king. He paused, lifted one bent wrist to rub it against the buckled scars of his cheek. “Thought there weren’t any of your kind left.”

“Humans think they know everything. Don’t stall. Deal.”

He looked at her. “Why do you want a gun?”

She wasn’t going to answer that. She wasn’t going to explain that while guns existed in her world, they were simple. Not automatic. Guns were useless against creatures that could become incorporeal, and humans didn’t war much with one another when they had a common enemy in the Shades. Zephyr wasn’t going to tell this boy that she would bring his gun back to her Society, for the Council to inspect and decide whether to use.

Zephyr felt tired, and suddenly disheartened.

Joe dealt the two of diamonds that had earlier fallen to the ground. “Gotta keep going, I guess.” He flipped a four, but that made only sixteen.

When the next card came, it seemed as if they’d both been expecting it: the queen of spades. He had gone over, way over, and Zephyr’s legs went watery, like they might melt, and it was relief that she felt, relief that he had lost, because it meant she didn’t have to kill him herself.

He faced her squarely. “I don’t understand.”

It took her a moment to realize that he wasn’t talking about the game.

“I don’t understand why you had to come *here*, to this club, on this night, to get a gun. There are thousands of guns in this city.”

Zephyr looked at the black paint of the closed club door. She sighed. “The music.”

“You can hear music anywhere.”

“No, you can’t. Not jazz. Not where I come from.”

Confusion made his face uglier. So did a trace of fear, finally, now that the game was done. For some reason, Zephyr didn’t like to see that.

“It doesn’t exist,” she said. “Jazz was never invented. And here…the Green Mill has the best jazz. Your employer demands the best.”

Joe’s expression seemed to crumple.

Zephyr held out her hand. “Give me the gun.”

He stepped back. She thought he was going to try to run away. She braced herself for what she would do to stop him. And she would do it, she

would. He was only human, and with the life he led he'd die soon enough anyway.

But he didn't run. He opened the club door.

Music floated out. It infused the night, rich as brassy ozone, light as pattering rain. An upright bass plucked throbbing notes, a drummer brushed the cymbal, cartwheeled a stick across his set. Zephyr heard the trumpeter mute his horn, and it all flowed out into the alley, a music made of the unexpected. A loose-limbered sound, one that made a philosophy of choices, highlighting the fact of them by pretending they didn't exist, by tripping lightly from one rhythm to the next, from key to key, as if nothing was certain, improvisation was everything, and practice was for fools.

Zephyr knew better. She knew that the musicians practiced for their master. But this was their art: to make their work seem like a game.

A game in which everything could change.

Zephyr looked at her hand, reaching for the gun.

She didn't want her hand anymore.

She didn't want her arm. Or her chopped hair. She didn't want her eyes and the way they widened to see fresh fear on Joe's face as he unslung the gun. The stories his grandfather had told him must have been accurate indeed.

Zephyr watched the gun swing on its strap as if to the music. If left in Joe's hands, this weapon could kill humans, who knew how many.

Zephyr told herself that this was why she said what she did.

"Keep it," she told Joe.

Then she did what she was good at. She vanished.

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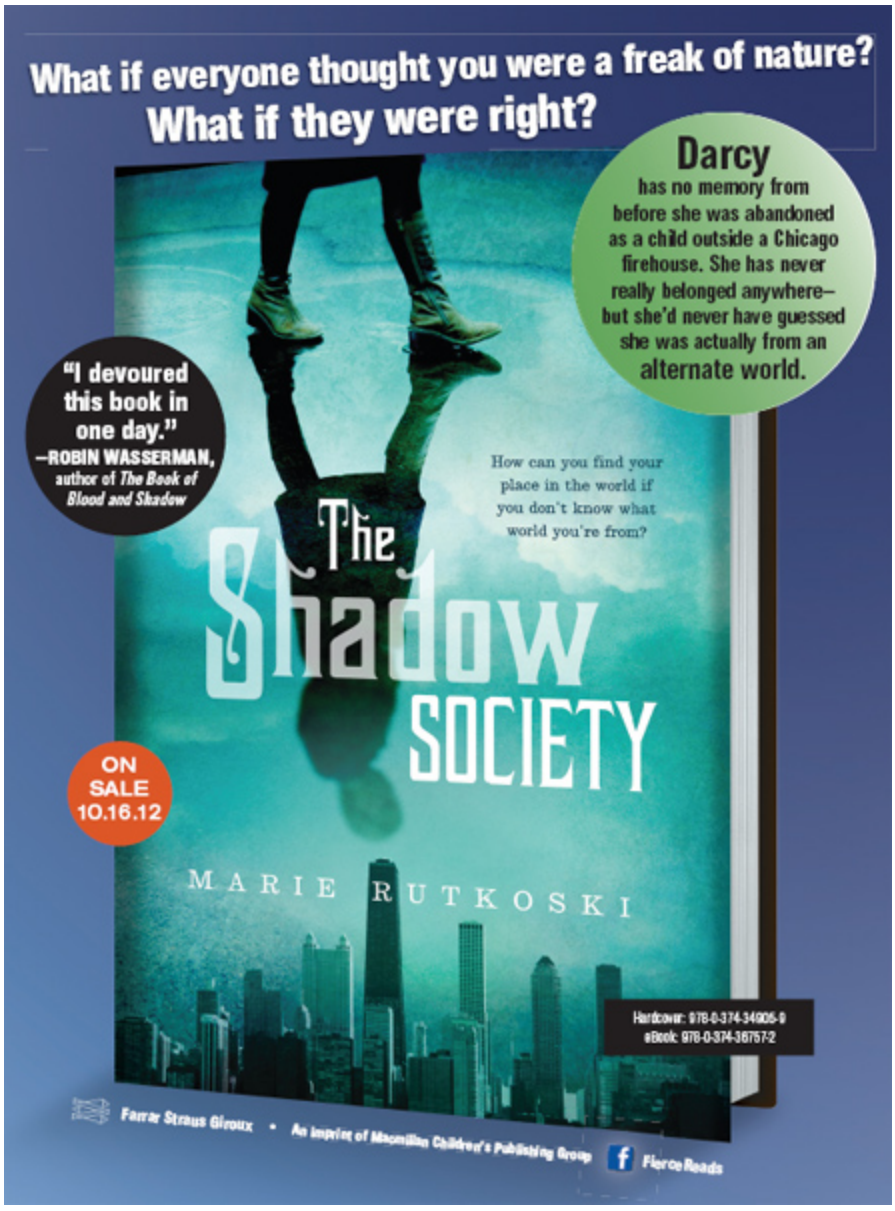
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Begin Reading

There was a time when the woods near Duva ate girls.

It’s been many years since any child was taken. But still, on nights like these, when the wind comes cold from Tsibeya, mothers hold their daughters tight and warn them not to stray too far from home. “Be back before dark,” they whisper. “The trees are hungry tonight.”

In those black days, on the edge of these very woods, there lived a girl named Nadya and her brother Havel, the children of Maxim Grushov, a carpenter and woodcutter. Maxim was a good man, well liked in the village. He made roofs that did not leak or bend, sturdy chairs, toys when they were called for, and his clever hands could fashion edges so smooth and fasten joints so neatly you might never find the seam. He traveled all over the countryside seeking work, to towns as far as Ryevost. He went by foot and by hay cart when the weather was kind, and in the winter, he hitched his two black horses to a sledge, kissed his children, and set out in the snow. Always he returned home to them, carrying bags of grain or a new bolt of wool, his pockets stuffed with candy for Nadya and her brother.

But when the famine came, people had no coin and nothing to trade for a prettily carved table or a wooden duck. They used their furniture for kindling and prayed they would make it through to spring. Maxim was forced to sell his horses, and then the sledge they'd once pulled over the snow-blanketed roads.

As Maxim’s luck faded, so did his wife. Soon she was more ghost than woman, drifting silently from room to room. Nadya tried to get her mother to eat what little food they had, giving up portions of turnip and potato, bundling her mother’s frail body in shawls and seating her on the porch in the hope that the fresh air might return some appetite to her. The only thing she seemed to crave were little cakes made by the widow Karina Stoyanova, scented with orange blossom and thick with icing. Where Karina got the sugar, no one knew—though the old women had their theories, most of which involved a rich and lonely tradesman from the river cities. But eventually, even Karina’s supplies dwindled, and when the little cakes were gone Nadya’s mother would touch neither food nor drink, not even the smallest sip of tea.

Nadya’s mother died on the first real day of winter, when the last bit of autumn fled from the air, and any hope of a mild year went with it. But the poor woman’s death went largely unremarked upon, because two days before she finally breathed her last ghostly sigh, another girl went missing.

Her name was Lara Deniken, a shy girl with a nervous laugh, the type to stand at the edges of village dances watching the fun. All they found of her was a single leather shoe, its heel thick with crusted blood. She was the second girl lost in as many months, after Shura Yeshevsky went out to hang the wash on the line and never came back in, leaving nothing but a pile of clothespins and sodden sheets lying in the mud.

Real fear came upon the town. In the past, girls had vanished every few years. True, there were rumors of girls being taken from other villages from time to time, but those children hardly seemed real. Now, as the famine deepened and the people of Duva went without, it was as if whatever waited in the woods had grown greedier and more desperate, too.

Lara. Shura. All those who had gone before: Betya. Ludmilla. Raiza. Nikolena. Other names now forgotten. In those days, they were whispered like an incantation. Parents sent up prayers to their Saints, girls walked in pairs, people watched their neighbors with suspicious eyes. On the edge of the woods, the townspeople built crooked altars—careful stacks of painted icons, burnt-down prayer candles, little piles of flowers and beads.

Men grumbled about bears and wolves. They organized hunting parties, talked about burning sections of the forest. Poor simple-minded Uri Pankin was nearly stoned to death when he was found in possession of one of the missing girls' dolls, and only his mother’s weeping and her insistence that she had found the sorry thing on the Vestopol Road saved him.

Some wondered if the girls might have just walked into the wood, lured there by their hunger. There were smells that wafted off the trees when the wind blew a certain way, impossible scents of lamb dumplings or sour cherry babka. Nadya had smelled them herself, sitting on the porch beside her mother, trying to get her to take another spoonful of broth. She would smell roasting pumpkin, walnuts, brown sugar, and find her feet carrying her down the stairs toward the waiting shadows, where the trees shuffled and sighed as if ready to part for her.

Stupid girls, you think. I would never be so foolish. But you've never known real hunger. The crops have been good these last years and people forget what the lean times are like. They forget the way mothers smothered

infants in their cribs to stop their hungry howls, or how the trapper Leonid Gemka was found gnawing on the muscle of his slain brother's calf when their hut was iced in for two long months.

Sitting on the porch of Baba Olya's house, the old women peered into the forest and muttered, *khitka*. The word raised the hairs on Nadya's arms, but she was no longer a child, so she laughed with her brother at such silly talk. The *khitkii* were spiteful forest spirits, bloodthirsty and vengeful. But in stories, they were known to hunger after newborns, not full-grown girls near old enough to marry.

'Who can say what shapes an appetite?' Baba Olya said with a dismissive wave of her gnarled hand. "Maybe this one is jealous. Or angry."

"Maybe it just likes the taste of our girls," said Anton Kozar, limping by on his one good leg and waggling his tongue obscenely. The old women squawked like geese and Baba Olya hurled a rock at him. War veteran or no, the man was disgusting.

When Nadya's father heard the old women muttering that Duva was cursed and demanding that the priest say blessings in the town square, he simply shook his head.

"An animal," he insisted. "A wolf mad with hunger."

He knew every path and corner of the forest, so he and his friends took up their rifles and headed back into the woods, full of grim determination. But again they found nothing, and the old women grumbled louder. What animal left no tracks, no trail, no trace of a body?

Suspicion crept through the town. That lecherous Anton Kozar had returned from the northern front much changed, had he not? Peli Yerokin had always been a violent boy. And Bela Pankin was a most peculiar woman, living out on that farm with her strange son, Uri. A *khitka* could take any form. Perhaps she had not "found" that missing girl's doll at all.

Standing at the lip of her mother's grave, Nadya noted Anton's seeping stump and lewd grin, Bela Pankin's worried frown, wiry Peli Yerokin with his tangled hair and balled fists, and the sympathetic smile of the widow Karina Stoyanova, the way her lovely black eyes stayed on Nadya's father as the coffin he'd carved with such care was lowered into the hard ground.

The *khitka* might take any form, but the shape it favored most was that of a beautiful woman.

Soon Karina seemed to be everywhere, bringing Nadya's father food and gifts of *kvas,* whispering in his ear that someone was needed to take care of him and his children. Havel would be gone for the draft soon, off to train in Poliznaya and begin his military service, but Nadya would still need minding.

"After all," said Karina in her warm honey voice. "You do not want her to disgrace you."

Later that night, Nadya went to her father as he sat drinking *kvas* by the fire. Maxim was whittling. When he had nothing to do, he sometimes made dolls for Nadya, though she'd long since outgrown them. His sharp knife moved in restless sweeps, leaving curls of soft wood on the floor. He'd been too long at home. The summer and fall that he might have spent seeking out work had been lost to his wife's illness, and the winter snows would soon close the roads. As his family went hungry, his wooden dolls gathered on the mantel, like a silent, useless choir. He cursed when he cut into his thumb, and only then did he notice Nadya standing nervously by his chair.

"Papa," Nadya said. "Please do not marry Karina."

She hoped that he would deny that he had been contemplating such a thing. Instead, he sucked his wounded thumb and said, "Why not? Don't you like Karina?"

"No," said Nadya honestly. "And she doesn't like me."

Maxim laughed and ran his rough knuckles over her cheek. "Sweet Nadya, who could not love you?" "Papa—"

"Karina is a good woman," Maxim said. His knuckles brushed her cheek again.

"It would be better if…" Abruptly, he dropped his hand and turned his face back to the fire. His eyes were distant, and when he spoke, his voice was cold and strange, as if rising from the bottom of a well. "Karina is a good woman," he repeated. His fingers gripped the arms of his chair. "Now leave me be."

She has him already, thought Nadya. He is under her spell.

The night before Havel left for the south, a dance was held in the barn by the Pankin farm. In better years, it might have been a raucous night, the tables piled high with plates of nuts and apples, pots of honey, and jars of bitter *kvas.* The men still drank and the fiddle played, but even pine boughs

and the high shine of Baba Olya’s treasured samovar could not hide the fact that now the tables were empty. And though people stomped and clapped their hands, they could not chase away the gloom that seemed to hang over the room.

Genetchka Lukin was chosen *Dros Koroleva,* Queen of the Thaw, and made to dance with all who asked her, in the hope that it would bring about a short winter, but only Havel looked truly happy. He was off to the army, to carry a gun and eat hot meals from the King's pocket. He might die or come back wounded as so many had before him, but on this night, his face glowed with the relief of leaving Duva behind.

Nadya danced once with her brother, once with Victor Yeronoff, then took a seat with the widows and wives and children. Her eyes fell on Karina, standing close to her father. Her limbs were white birch branches; her eyes were ice over black water. Maxim looked unsteady on his feet.

Khitka. The word drifted down to Nadya from the barn’s shadowed eaves as she watched Karina weave her arm through Maxim's like the pale stalk of a climbing vine. Nadya pushed her foolish thoughts away and turned to watch Genetchka Lukin dance, her long golden hair braided with bright red ribbons. Nadya was ashamed to feel a pang of envy. Silly, she told herself, watching Genetchka struggle through a dance with Anton Kozar. He simply stood and swayed, one arm keeping balance on his crutch, the other clutching tightly to poor Gentchka’s waist. Silly, but she felt it just the same.

“Go with Havel,” said a voice at her shoulder.

Nadya nearly jumped. She hadn’t noticed Karina standing beside her. She looked up at the slender woman, her dark hair lying in coils around her white neck.

She turned her gaze back to the dance. “I can't and you know it. I'm not old enough.” It would be two more years before Nadya was called to the draft.

“So lie.”

"This is my home," Nadya whispered furiously, embarrassed by the tears that rose behind her eyes. “You can't just send me away.” *My father won't let you*, she added silently. But somehow, she did not have the courage to speak the words aloud.

Karina leaned in close to Nadya. When she smiled, her lips split wet and red around what seemed like far too many teeth.

“Havel could at least work and hunt,” she whispered. “You’re just another mouth.” She reached out and tugged one of Nadya’s curls, hard. Nadya knew that if her father happened to look over he would just see a beautiful woman, grinning and talking to his daughter, perhaps encouraging her to dance.

“I will warn you just this once,” hissed Karina Stoyanova. “Go.”

The next day Genetchka Lukin’s mother discovered that her daughter’s bed had not been slept in. The Queen of the Thaw had never made it home from the dance. At the edge of the wood, a red ribbon fluttered from the branches of a narrow birch, a few golden hairs trailing from the knot, as if it had been torn from her head.

Nadya stood silent as Genetchka’s mother fell to her knees and began to wail, calling out to her Saints and pressing the red ribbon to her lips as she wept. Across the road, Nadya saw Karina watching, her eyes black, her lips turned down like peeling bark, her long, slender fingers like raw spokes of branches, stripped bare by a hard wind.

When Havel said his goodbyes, he drew Nadya close. “Be safe,” he whispered in her ear.

“How?” Nadya replied, but Havel had no answer.

A week later, Maxim Grushov and Karina Stoyanova were wed in the little whitewashed chapel at the center of town. There was no food for a wedding feast, and there were no flowers for the bride’s hair, but she wore her grandmother’s pearl *kokochnik* and all agreed that, though the pearls were most likely fake, she was lovely just the same.

That night, Nadya slept in Baba Olya’s front room so the bride and groom could be alone. In the morning, when she returned home, she found the house silent, the couple still abed. On the kitchen table lay an overturned bottle of wine and the remnants of what must have been a cake, the crumbs still scented with orange blossom. It seemed Karina had still had some sugar to spare after all.

Nadya couldn’t help herself. She licked the plate.

Despite Havel’s absence, the house felt crowded now. Maxim prowled the rooms, unable to sit still for more than a few minutes. He’d seemed calm after the wedding, nearly happy, but with every passing day, he grew more restless. He drank and cursed his lack of work, his lost sledge, his

empty belly. He snapped at Nadya and turned away when she came too near, as if he could barely stand the sight of her.

On the rare occasions Maxim showed Nadya any affection, Karina would appear, hovering in the doorway, her black eyes greedy, a rag twisting in her narrow hands. She would order Nadya into the kitchen and burden her with some ridiculous chore, commanding her to stay out of her father's way.

At meals, Karina watched Nadya eat as if her every bite of watered-down broth was an offense, as if every scrape of Nadya's spoon hollowed out Karina's belly a little more, widening the hole inside her.

Little more than a week had passed before Karina took hold of Nadya's arm and nodded toward the woods. "Go check the traps," she said.

"It's almost dark," Nadya protested.

"Don't be foolish. There's plenty of light. Now go and make yourself useful and don't come back without a rabbit for our supper."

"Where's my father?" Nadya demanded.

"He is with Anton Kozar, playing cards and drinking *kvas*, and trying to forget that he was cursed with a useless daughter." Karina gave Nadya a hard push out the door.

"Go, or I'll tell him that I caught you with Victor Yeronoff."

Nadya longed to march to Anton Kozar's shabby rooms, knock the *kvas* from her father's hands, tell him that she wanted her home back from this dangerous dark-eyed stranger. And if she'd been sure that her father would take her side, she might have done just that. Instead, Nadya walked into the woods.

She did not bother with quiet or stealth, and when the first two snares were empty, she ignored her pounding heart and the lengthening shadows and walked on, following the white stones that Havel had used to mark the path. In the third trap she found a brown hare, trembling with fright. She ignored the panicked whistle from its lungs as she snapped its neck with a single determined twist and felt its warm body go limp. As she walked home with her prize, she let herself imagine her father's pleasure at the evening meal. He would tell her she was brave and foolish to go into the wood alone, and when she told him what his new wife had done, he would send Karina from the house forever.

But when she stepped inside the house, Karina was waiting, her face pale with fury. She seized Nadya, tore the rabbit from her hands, and

shoved her into her room. Nadya heard the bolt slide home. For a long while, she pounded at the door, shouting to be let free. But who was there to hear her?

Finally, weak with hunger and frustration, she let her tears come. She curled on her bed, shaken by sobs, kept awake by the growling of her empty stomach. She missed Havel. She missed her mother. All she'd had to eat was a piece of turnip at breakfast, and she knew that if Karina hadn't taken the hare from her, she would have torn it open and eaten it raw.

Later, she heard the door to the house bang open, heard her father's unsteady footsteps coming down the hall, the tentative scratch of his fingers at her door. Before she could answer she heard Karina's voice, crooning, crooning. Silence, the rustle of fabric, a thump followed by a groan, then the steady thud of bodies against the wall. Nadya clutched her pillow to her ears, trying to drown out their pants and moans, sure that Karina knew she could hear and that this was some kind of punishment. She buried her head beneath the covers, but could not escape that shaming, frantic rhythm. She could hear Karina's voice that night at the dance: *I will warn you just this once. Go. Go. Go.*

The next day, Nadya's father did not rise until after noon. When he entered the kitchen and Nadya handed him his tea, he flinched away from her, eyes skittering across the floor. Karina stood at the basin, face pinched, mixing up a batch of lye.

"I'm going to Anton's," Maxim said.

Nadya wanted to beg him not to leave her, but even in her own head, the plea sounded foolish. In the next moment, he was gone.

This time, when Karina took hold of her and said, "Go check the traps," Nadya did not argue.

She had braved the woods once and she would do it again. This time, she would clean and cook the rabbit herself and return home with a full belly, strong enough to face Karina with or without her father's help.

Hope made her stubborn, and when the first flurries of snow fell, Nadya pushed on, moving from one empty trap to the next. It was only when the light began to fade that she realized she could no longer make out Havel's white stone markers.

Nadya stood in the falling snow and turned in a slow circle, searching for some familiar sign that would lead her back to the path. The trees were black slashes of shadow. The ground rose and fell in soft, billowing drifts. The light had gone dull and diffused. There was no way of knowing which way home might be. All around her there was silence, broken only by the howl of the rising wind and her own rough breathing, as the woods slid into darkness.

And then she smelled it, hot and sweet, a fragrant cloud so dense with scent it singed the edges of her nostrils: burning sugar.

Nadya's breath came in frantic little gasps, and even as her terror grew, her mouth began to water. She thought of the rabbit, plucked from the trap, the rapid beat of its heart, the rolling whites of its eyes. Something brushed against her in the dark. Nadya did not pause to think; she ran.

She crashed blindly through the wood, branches slashing at her cheeks, her feet tangling in snow-laden brambles, unsure if she heard her own clumsy footfalls or something slavering behind her, something with crowded teeth and long white fingers that clutched at the hem of her coat.

When she saw the glow of light filtering through the trees ahead, for one delirious moment she thought she'd somehow made it home. But as she burst into the clearing, she saw that the hut silhouetted before her was all wrong. It was lean and crooked, with lights that glowed in every window. No one in her village would ever waste candles that way.

The hut seemed to shift, almost as if it were turning to welcome her. She hesitated, took a step back. A twig snapped behind her. She bolted for the hut's painted door.

Nadya rattled the handle, a lantern swaying above her.

"Help me!" she cried. And the door swung open. She slipped inside, slamming it behind her. Was that a thump she heard? The frustrated scrabble of paws? It was hard to tell over the hoarse sobs wheezing from her chest. She stood with her forehead pressed to the door, waiting for her heart to stop hammering, and only then, when she could take a full breath, did she turn.

The room was warm and golden, like the inside of a currant bun, thick with the smells of browning meat and fresh-baked bread. Every surface gleamed like new, cheerfully painted with leaves and flowers, animals and tiny people, the paint so fresh and bright it hurt her eyes to look at it after the dull gray surfaces of Duva.

At the far wall, a woman stood at a vast black cookstove that stretched the length of the room. Twenty different pots boiled atop it, some small and covered, some large and near to bubbling over. The oven beneath had two hinged iron doors that opened from the center and was so large that a man might have laid lengthwise in it. Or at least a child.

The woman lifted the lid of one of the pots and a cloud of fragrant steam drifted toward Nadya. Onions. Sorrel. Chicken stock. Hunger came upon her, more piercing and consuming than her fear. A low growl escaped her lips and she clapped a hand to her mouth.

The woman glanced over her shoulder.

She was old but not ugly, her long gray braid tied with a red ribbon. Nadya stared at that ribbon and hesitated, thinking of Genetchka Lukin. The smells of sugar and lamb and garlic and butter, all layered upon one another, made her shake with longing.

A dog lay curled in a basket, gnawing on a bone, but when Nadya looked closer she saw it was not a dog at all, but a little bear wearing a golden collar.

“You like Vladchek?”

Nadya nodded.

The woman set a heaping plate of stew down on the table.

“Sit,” said the woman as she returned to the stove. “Eat.”

Nadya removed her coat and hung it by the door. She pulled her damp mittens from her hands and sat down carefully at the table. She lifted her spoon, but still she hesitated. She knew from stories that you must not eat at a witch’s table.

But in the end, she could not resist. She ate the stew, every hot and savory bite of it, then flaky rolls, plums in syrup, egg pudding, and a rum cake thick with raisins and brown sugar. Nadya ate and ate while the woman tended to the pots on the stove, sometimes humming a little as she worked.

She's fattening me up, thought Nadya, her lids growing heavy. *She’ll wait for me to fall asleep, then stuff me in the oven and cook me up to make more stew.* But Nadya found she didn’t care. The woman set a blanket by the stove, next to Vladchek’s basket, and Nadya fell off to sleep, glad that at least she would die with a full belly.

But when she woke the next morning, she was still in one piece and the table was set with a hot bowl of porridge, stacks of rye toast slathered with

butter, and plates of shiny little herring swimming in oil.

The old woman introduced herself as Magda, then sat silent, sucking on a sugared plum, watching Nadya eat her breakfast.

Nadya ate till her stomach ached while outside the snow continued to fall. When she was done, she set her empty bowl down on the floor where Vladchek licked it clean. Only then did Magda spit the plum pit into her palm and say, “What is it you want?”

“I want to go home,” Nadya replied.

“So go.”

Nadya looked outside to where the snow was still falling heavy. “I can't.”

“Well then,” said Magda. “Come help me stir the pot.”

For the rest of the day, Nadya darned socks, scrubbed pans, chopped herbs, and strained syrups. She stood at the stove for long hours, her hair curling from the heat and steam, stirring the many little pots, and wondering all the while what might become of her. That night they ate stuffed cabbage leaves, crispy roast goose, little dishes of apricot custard.

The next day, Nadya breakfasted on butter-soaked blini stuffed with cherries and cream. When she finished, the witch asked her, “What is it you want?”

“I want to go home,” said Nadya, glancing at the snow still falling outside. “But I can't.”

“Well then,” said Magda. “Come help me stir the pot.”

This was how it went, day after day, as the snow fell and filled the clearing, rising up around the hut in great white waves.

On the morning the snow finally stopped, the witch fed Nadya potato pie and sausages and asked her, “What is it you want?”

“I want to go home,” said Nadya.

“Well then,” said Magda. “You'd better start shoveling.”

So Nadya took up the shovel and cleared a path around the hut, accompanied by Vladchek snuffling in the snow beside her and an eyeless crow that Magda fed on rye crumbs, and that sometimes perched upon the witch’s shoulder. In the afternoon, Nadya ate a slab of black bread spread with soft cheese and a dish of baked apples. Magda gave her a mug of hot tea laced with sugar, and back out she went.

When she finally reached the edge of the clearing, she wondered just where she was supposed to go. The frost had come. The woods were a

frozen mass of snow and tangled branches. What might be waiting for her in there? And even if she could make it through the deep snow and find her way back to Duva, what then? A tentative embrace from her weak-willed father? Far worse from his hungry-eyed wife? No path could lead her back to the home she had known. The thought opened a bleak crack inside of her, a fissure where the cold seeped through. For a terrifying moment, she was nothing but a lost girl, nameless and unwanted. She might stand there forever, a shovel in her hand, with no one to call her home. Nadya turned on her heel and scurried back to the warm confines of the hut, whispering her name beneath her breath as if she might forget it.

Each day, Nadya worked. She cleaned floors, dusted shelves, mended clothes, shoveled snow, and scraped the ice away from the windows. But mostly, she helped Magda with her cooking. It was not all food. There were tonics and ointments, bitter smelling pastes, jewel-colored powders packed in small enamel boxes, tinctures in brown glass bottles. There was always something strange brewing on that stove.

Soon she learned why.

They came late at night, when the moon was waxing, slogging through miles of ice and snow, on sledges and shaggy ponies, even on foot. They brought eggs, jars of preserves, sacks of flour, bales of wheat. They brought smoked fish, blocks of salt, wheels of cheese, bottles of wine, tins of tea, and bag after bag of sugar, for there was no denying Magda's sweet tooth. They cried out for love potions and untraceable poisons. They begged to be made beautiful, healthy, rich.

Always, Nadya stayed hidden. On Magda's orders, she climbed high into the shelves of the larder.

"Stay there and keep quiet," Magda said. "I don't need rumors starting that I've been taking girls."

So Nadya sat with Vladchek, nibbling on a spice cookie or sucking on a hunk of black licorice, watching Magda work. She might have announced herself to these strangers at any time, pleaded to be taken home or given shelter, shouted that she'd been trapped by a witch. Instead, she sat silent, sugar melting on her tongue, watching as they came to this old woman, how they turned to her with desperation, with resentment, but always with respect.

Magda gave them drops for their eyes, tonics for the scalp. She ran her hands over their wrinkles, tapped a man's chest till he hacked up black bile. Nadya was never sure how much was real and how much was show until the night the wax-skinned woman came.

She was gaunt, as they all were, her face a skull of hard-carved hollows. Magda asked the question she asked anyone who came to her door: "What is it you want?" The woman collapsed in her arms, weeping, as Magda murmured soothing words, patted her hand, dried her tears. They conferred in voices too low for Nadya to decipher, and before the woman left, she took a tiny pouch from her pocket and shook the contents into Magda's palm. Nadya craned her neck to get a better look, but Magda's hand clamped shut too quickly.

The next day, Magda sent Nadya out of the house to shovel snow. When she returned at lunchtime, she was shooed back out with a cup of codfish stew. Dusk came, and as Nadya finished sprinkling salt along the edges of the path, the scent of gingerbread drifted to her across the clearing, rich and spicy, filling her nose until she felt nearly drunk.

All through dinner, she waited for Magda to open the oven, but when the meal was finished, the old woman set a piece of yesterday's lemon cake before her. Nadya shrugged. As she reached for the cream, she heard a soft sound, a gurgle. She looked at Vladchek, but the bear was fast asleep, snoring softly.

And then she heard it again, a gurgle followed by a plaintive coo. From inside the oven.

Nadya pushed back from the table, nearly knocking her chair over, and stared at Magda, horrified, but the witch did not flinch.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Go into the larder, Nadya."

For a moment, Nadya hovered between the table and the door. Then she backed away, pausing only to grab hold of Vladchek's collar and drag him with her onto the top shelf of the larder, comforted by his drowsy snuffling and the warm feel of his fur beneath her hands.

Magda opened the door. The wax-faced woman stood waiting at the threshold, almost as if she were afraid to move. Magda wrapped her hands in towels and pulled open the oven's iron doors. A squalling cry filled the room. The woman grabbed at the doorposts as her knees buckled, then pressed her hands to her mouth, her chest heaving, tears streaming over her

sallow cheeks. Magda swaddled the gingerbaby in a red kerchief and handed it, squirming and mewling, into the woman's trembling, outstretched arms. "*Milaya*," the woman crooned. *Sweet girl.* She turned her back on Magda and disappeared into the night, not bothering to close the door behind her.

The next day, Nadya left her breakfast untouched, placing her cold bowl of porridge on the floor for Vladchek. He turned up his nose at it until Magda put it back on the stove to warm.

Before Magda could ask her question, Nadya said, "That wasn't a real child. Why did she take it?"

"It was real enough."

"What will happen to it? What will happen to her?" Nadya asked, a wild edge to her voice.

"Eventually it will be nothing but crumbs," said Magda.

"And then what? Will you just make her another?"

"The mother will be dead long before that. She has the same fever that took her infant."

"Then cure her!" Nadya shouted, smacking the table with her unused spoon.

"She didn't ask to be cured. She asked for a child."

Nadya put on her mittens and stomped out into the yard. She did not go inside for lunch. She meant to skip dinner too, to show what she thought of Magda and her terrible magic. But by the time night came her stomach was growling, and when Magda put down a plate of sliced duck with hunter's sauce, Nadya picked up her fork and knife.

"I want to go home," she muttered to her plate.

"So go," said Magda.

Winter dragged on with frost and cold, but the lamps always burned golden in the little hut. Nadya's cheeks grew rosy and her clothes grew snug. She learned how to mix up Magda's tonics without looking at the recipes and how to bake an almond cake in the shape of a crown. She learned which herbs were valuable and which were dangerous, and which herbs were valuable because they were dangerous.

Nadya knew there was much that Magda didn’t teach her. She told herself she was glad of it, that she wanted nothing to do with Magda’s abominations. But sometimes she felt her curiosity clawing at her like a different kind of hunger.

And then, one morning, she woke to the tapping of the blind crow’s beak on the sill and the drip, drip, drip of melted snow from the eaves. Bright sun shone through the windows. The thaw had come.

That morning, Magda laid out sweet rolls with prune jam, a plate of boiled eggs, and bitter greens. Nadya ate and ate, afraid to reach the end of her meal, but eventually she could not take another bite.

“What is it you want?” asked Magda.

This time Nadya hesitated, afraid. “If I go, couldn't I just—”

“You cannot come and go from this place like you’re fetching water from a well. I will not have you bring a monster to my door.” Nadya shivered. *A monster.* So she’d been right about Karina.

“What is it you want?” asked Magda again.

Nadya thought of Genetchka dancing, of nervous Lara, of Betya and Ludmilla, of the others she had never known.

“I want my father to be free of Karina. I want Duva to be free. I want to go home.”

Gently, Magda reached out and touched Nadya's left hand—first the ring finger, then the pinkie.

“Think on it,” she said.

The next morning when Magda went to lay out the breakfast, she found the cleaver Nadya had placed there.

For two days, the cleaver lay untouched on the table, as they measured and sifted and mixed, making batch after batch of batter. On the second afternoon, when the hardest of the work was done, Magda turned to Nadya.

“You know that you are welcome to remain here with me,” said the witch.

Nadya stretched out her hand.

Magda sighed. The cleaver flashed once in the afternoon sun, the edge gleaming the dull gray of Grisha steel, then fell with a sound like a gunshot.

At the sight of her fingers lying forlorn on the table, Nadya fainted.

Magda healed the stumps of Nadya's fingers, bound her hand, let her rest. And while she slept, Magda took the two fingers and ground them down to a wet red meal that she mixed into the batter.

When Nadya revived, they worked side by side, shaping the gingergirl on a damp plank near as big as a door, then shoved her into the blazing oven.

All night the gingergirl baked, filling the hut with a marvelous smell. Nadya knew she was smelling her own bones and blood, but still her mouth watered. She dozed. Near dawn, the oven doors creaked open and the gingergirl crawled out. She crossed the room, opened the window, and lay down on the counter to let herself cool.

In the morning, Nadya and Magda attended the gingergirl, dusted her with sugar, gave her frosted lips and thick ropes of icing for hair.

They dressed her in Nadya's clothes and boots, and set her on the path toward Duva.

Then Magda sat Nadya down at the table and took a small jar from one of the cabinets. She opened the window and the eyeless black crow came to rest on the table, picking at the crumbs the gingergirl had left behind.

Magda tipped the contents of the jar into her palm and held them out to Nadya. "Open your mouth," she said.

In Magda's hand, in a pool of shiny fluid, lay a pair of bright blue eyes. Hatchling's eyes.

"Do not swallow," said Magda sternly, "and do not retch."

Nadya closed her eyes and forced her lips to part. She tried not to gag as the crow's eyes slid onto her tongue.

"Open your eyes," commanded Magda.

Nadya obeyed, and when she did, the whole room had shifted. She saw herself sitting in a chair, eyes still closed, Magda beside her. She tried to raise her hands, but found that her wings rose instead. She hopped on her little crow feet and released a startled squawk of surprise.

Magda shooed her to the window and Nadya, elated from the feeling of her wings and the wind spreading beneath them, did not see the sadness in the old woman's gaze.

Nadya rose high into the air in a great wheeling arc, dipping her wings, learning the feel of them. She saw the woods spread beneath her, the clearing, and Magda's hut. She saw the Petrazoi in the distance and, gliding lower, she saw the gingergirl's path through the woods. She swooped and

darted between the trees, unafraid of the forest for the first time since she could remember.

She circled over Duva, saw the main street, the cemetery, two new altars laid out. Two more girls gone during the long winter while she grew fat at the witch's table. They would be the last. She screeched and dove beside the gingergirl, driving her onward, her soldier, her champion.

Nadya watched from a clothesline as the gingergirl crossed the clearing to her father's house. Inside, she could hear raised voices arguing. Did he know what Karina had done? Had he begun to suspect what she truly was?

The gingergirl knocked and the voices quieted. When the door swung open, her father squinted into the dusk. Nadya was shocked at the toll the winter had taken on him. His broad shoulders looked hunched and narrow, and, even from a distance, she could see the way the skin hung loose on his frame. She waited for him to cry out in horror at the monster that stood before him.

"Nadya?" Maxim gasped. "Nadya!" He pulled the gingergirl into his arms with a rough cry.

Karina appeared behind him in the door, face pale, eyes wide. Nadya felt a twinge of disappointment. Somehow she'd imagined that Karina would take one look at the gingergirl and crumble to dust, or that the sight of Nadya alive and well on her doorstep would force her to blurt out some ugly confession.

Maxim drew the gingergirl inside and Nadya fluttered down to the windowsill to peer through the glass.

The house looked more cramped and gray than ever after the warmth of Magda's hut. She saw that the collection of wooden dolls on the mantel had grown.

Nadya's father caressed the gingergirl's burnished brown arm, peppering her with questions, but the gingergirl stayed silent, huddling by the fire. Nadya wasn't even sure that she *could* speak.

But Maxim did not seem to notice her silence. He babbled on, laughing, crying, shaking his head in wonder. Karina hovered behind him, watching as she always had. There was fear in her eyes, but something else, too, something troubling that looked almost like gratitude.

Then Karina stepped forward, touched the gingergirl's soft cheek, her frosted hair. Nadya waited, sure Karina would be singed, that she would let out a shriek as the flesh of her hand peeled away like bark, revealing not

bones but branches and the monstrous form of the *khitka* beneath her pretty skin.

Instead, Karina bowed her head and murmured what might have been a prayer. She took her coat from the hook.

“I am going to Baba Olya's.”

“Yes, yes,” Maxim said distractedly, unable to pull his gaze from his daughter.

She’s running away, Nadya realized in horror. And the gingergirl was making no move to stop her.

Karina wrapped her head in a scarf, pulled on her gloves, and slipped out the door, shutting it behind her without a backward glance.

Nadya hopped and squawked from the window ledge.

I will follow her, she thought. *I will peck out her eyes.*

Karina bent down, picked up a pebble from the path, and hurled it at Nadya.

Nadya released an indignant caw.

But when Karina spoke, her voice was gentle. “Fly away now, little bird,” she said. “Some things are better left unseen.” Then she disappeared into the dusk.

Nadya fluttered her wings, unsure of what to do. She peered back through the window.

Her father had pulled the gingergirl into his lap and was stroking her white hair.

“Nadya,” he said again and again. “Nadya.” He nuzzled the brown flesh of her shoulder, pressed his lips to her skin.

Outside, Nadya’s small heart beat against her hollow bones.

“Forgive me,” Maxim murmured, the tears on his cheeks dissolving the soft curve of icing at her neck.

Nadya shivered. Her wings stuttered a futile, desperate tattoo on the glass. But her father’s hand slipped beneath the hem of her skirts, and the gingergirl did not move.

It isn't me, Nadya told herself. *Not really. It isn't me.*

She thought of her father’s restlessness, of his lost horses, his treasured sledge. Before that…before that, girls had gone missing from other towns, one here, one there. Stories, rumors, faraway crimes. But then the famine had come, the long winter, and Maxim had been trapped.

“I've tried to stop,” he said as he pulled his daughter close. “Believe me,” he begged. “Say you believe me.”

The gingergirl stayed silent.

Maxim opened his wet mouth to kiss her again and the sound he made was something between a groan and a sigh as his teeth sank into the sweetness of her shoulder.

The sigh turned to a sob as he bit down.

Nadya watched her father consume the gingergirl, bite by bite, limb by limb. He wept as he ate, but he did not stop, and by the time he was finished, the fire was cold in the grate. When he was done, he lay stretched out on the floor, his belly distended, his fingers sticky, his beard crusted with crumbs. Only then did the crow turn away.

They found Nadya’s father there the next morning, his insides ruptured and stinking of rot. He had spent the night on his knees, vomiting blood and sugar. Karina had not been home to help him. When they took up the bloodstained floorboards, they found a stash of objects, among them, a child’s prayer book, a bracelet of glass beads, the rest of the vivid red ribbons Genetchka had worn in her hair the night of the dance, and Lara Deniken’s white apron, embroidered with her clumsy stitches, the strings stained with blood. From the mantel, the little wooden dolls looked on.

Nadya flew back to the witch’s hut, returned to her body by Magda’s soft words and Vladchek licking her limp hand. She spent long days in silence, working beside Magda, only picking at her food.

It was not her father she thought of, but Karina. Karina who had found ways to visit when Nadya’s mother took ill, who had filled the rooms when Havel left, keeping Nadya close. Karina who had driven Nadya into the woods, so that there would be nothing left for her father to use but a ghost. Karina who had given herself to a monster, in the hope of saving just one girl.

Nadya scrubbed and cooked and cleared the garden, and thought of Karina alone with Maxim over the long winter, fearing his absence, longing for it, searching the house for some way to prove her suspicions, her fingers scrabbling over floors and cabinets, feeling for the secret seams hidden by the carpenter’s clever hands.

In Duva, there was talk of burning Maxim Grushov's body, but in the end they buried him without Saints' prayers, in rocky soil where to this day nothing grows. The lost girls' bodies were never found, though occasionally a hunter will come across a stash of bones in the wood, a shell comb, or a shoe.

Karina moved away to another little town. Who knows what became of her? Few good things happen to a woman alone. Nadya's brother Havel served in the northern campaign and came home quite the hero. As for Nadya, she lived with Magda and learned all the old woman's tricks, magic best not spoken of on a night like this. There are some who say that when the moon is waxing, she dares things not even Magda would try.

Now you know what monsters once lurked in the woods near Duva, and if you ever meet a bear with a golden collar, you will be able to greet him by name. So shut the window tight and make sure the latch is fastened. Dark things have a way of slipping in through narrow spaces. Shall we have something good to eat?

Well then, come help me stir the pot.

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From

Leigh Bardugo

DEBUT AUTHOR

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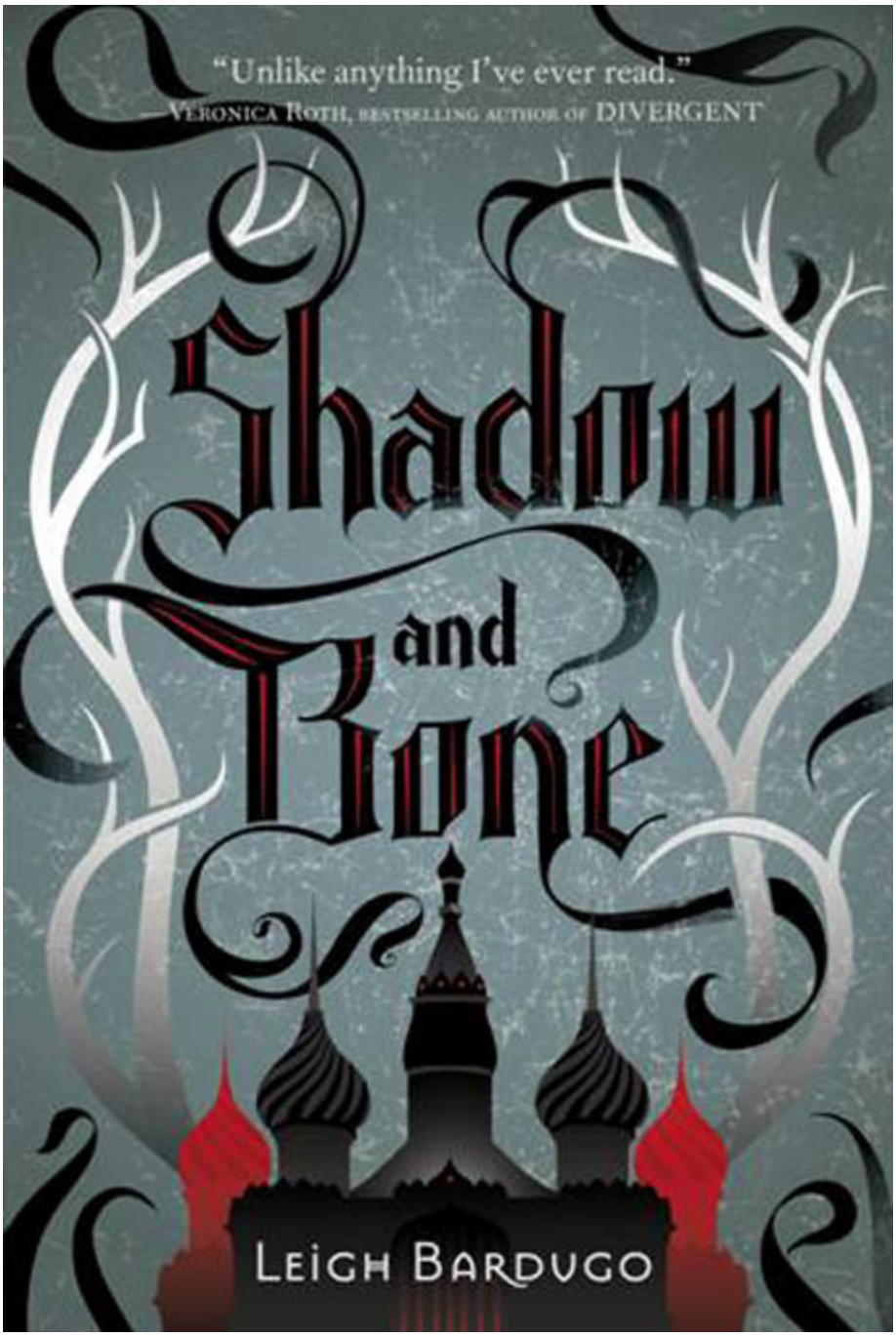
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Shadow and Bone

LEIGH BARDUGO

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Summary: Orphaned by the Border Wars, Alina Starkov is taken from obscurity and her only friend, Mal, to become the protégée of the mysterious Darkling, who trains her to join the magical elite in the belief that she is the Sun Summoner, who can destroy the monsters of the Fold.
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For my grandfather:
Tell me some lies.

THE GRISHA

Soldiers of the Second Army
Masters of the Small Science

CORPORALKI
(The Order of the Living and the Dead)
Heartrenders
Healers

ETHEREALKI
(The Order of Summoners)
Squallers
Inferni
Tidemakers

MATERIALKI
(The Order of Fabrikators)
Durasts
Alkemi

Before

HE SERVANTS CALLED them *malenchki*, little ghosts, because they were the smallest and the youngest, and because they haunted the Duke's house like giggling phantoms, darting in and out of rooms, hiding in cupboards to eavesdrop, sneaking into the kitchen to steal the last of the summer peaches.

The boy and the girl had arrived within weeks of each other, two more orphans of the border wars, dirty-faced refugees plucked from the rubble of distant towns and brought to the Duke's estate to learn to read and write, and to learn a trade. The boy was short and stocky, shy but always smiling. The girl was different, and she knew it.

Huddled in the kitchen cupboard, listening to the grownups gossip, she heard the Duke's housekeeper, Ana Kuya, say, "She's an ugly little thing. No child should look like that. Pale and sour, like a glass of milk that's turned."

"And so skinny!" the cook replied. "Never finishes her supper."

Crouched beside the girl, the boy turned to her and whispered, "Why *don't* you eat?"

"Because everything she cooks tastes like mud."

"Tastes fine to me."

"You'll eat anything."

They bent their ears back to the crack in the cupboard doors.

A moment later the boy whispered, "I don't think you're ugly."

"Shhhh!" the girl hissed. But hidden by the deep shadows of the cupboard, she smiled.

IN THE SUMMER, they endured long hours of chores followed by even longer hours of lessons in stifling classrooms. When the heat was at its worst, they escaped into the woods to hunt for birds' nests or swim in the muddy little creek, or they would lie for hours in their meadow, watching the sun pass slowly overhead, speculating on where they would build their dairy farm and whether they would have two white cows or three. In the winter, the Duke left for his city house in Os Alta, and as the days grew shorter and

colder, the teachers grew lax in their duties, preferring to sit by the fire and play cards or drink *kvas.* Bored and trapped indoors, the older children doled out more frequent beatings. So the boy and the girl hid in the disused rooms of the estate, putting on plays for the mice and trying to keep warm.

On the day the Grisha Examiners came, the boy and the girl were perched in the window seat of a dusty upstairs bedroom, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mail coach. Instead, they saw a sleigh, a troika pulled by three black horses, pass through the white stone gates onto the estate. They watched its silent progress through the snow to the Duke's front door.

Three figures emerged in elegant fur hats and heavy wool *kefta*: one in crimson, one in darkest blue, and one in vibrant purple.

"Grisha!" the girl whispered.

"Quick!" said the boy.

In an instant, they had shaken off their shoes and were running silently down the hall, slipping through the empty music room and darting behind a column in the gallery that overlooked the sitting room where Ana Kuya liked to receive guests.

Ana Kuya was already there, birdlike in her black dress, pouring tea from the samovar, her large key ring jangling at her waist.

"There are just the two this year, then?" said a woman's low voice.

They peered through the railing of the balcony to the room below. Two of the Grisha sat by the fire: a handsome man in blue and a woman in red robes with a haughty, refined air. The third, a young blond man, ambled about the room, stretching his legs.

"Yes," said Ana Kuya. "A boy and a girl, the youngest here by quite a bit. Both around eight, we think."

"You think?" asked the man in blue.

"When the parents are deceased…"

"We understand," said the woman. "We are, of course, great admirers of your institution. We only wish more of the nobility took an interest in the common people."

"Our Duke is a very great man," said Ana Kuya.

Up in the balcony, the boy and the girl nodded sagely to each other. Their benefactor, Duke Keramsov, was a celebrated war hero and a friend to the people. When he had returned from the front lines, he converted his estate into an orphanage and a home for war widows. They were told to keep him nightly in their prayers.

“And what are they like, these children?” asked the woman.

“The girl has some talent for drawing. The boy is most at home in the meadow and the wood.”

“But what are they *like*?” repeated the woman.

Ana Kuya pursed her withered lips. “What are they like? They are undisciplined, contrary, far too attached to each other. They—”

“They are listening to every word we say,” said the young man in purple.

The boy and the girl jumped in surprise. He was staring directly at their hiding spot. They shrank behind the column, but it was too late.

Ana Kuya’s voice lashed out like a whip. “Alina Starkov! Malyen Oretsev! Come down here at once!”

Reluctantly, Alina and Mal made their way down the narrow spiral staircase at the end of the gallery. When they reached the bottom, the woman in red rose from her chair and gestured them forward.

“Do you know who we are?” the woman asked. Her hair was steel gray. Her face lined, but beautiful.

“You’re witches!” blurted Mal.

“Witches?” she snarled. She whirled on Ana Kuya. “Is that what you teach at this school? Superstition and lies?”

Ana Kuya flushed with embarrassment. The woman in red turned back to Mal and Alina, her dark eyes blazing. “We are not witches. We are practitioners of the Small Science. We keep this country and this kingdom safe.”

“As does the First Army,” Ana Kuya said quietly, an unmistakeable edge to her voice.

The woman in red stiffened, but after a moment she conceded, “As does the King’s Army.”

The young man in purple smiled and knelt before the children. He said gently, “When the leaves change color, do you call it magic? What about when you cut your hand and it heals? And when you put a pot of water on the stove and it boils, is it magic then?”

Mal shook his head, his eyes wide.

But Alina frowned and said, “Anyone can boil water.”

Ana Kuya sighed in exasperation, but the woman in red laughed.

“You’re very right. Anyone can boil water. But not just anyone can master the Small Science. That’s why we’ve come to test you.” She turned

to Ana Kuya. “Leave us now.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Mal. “What happens if we’re Grisha? What happens to us?”

The woman in red looked down at them. “If, by some small chance, *one* of you is Grisha, then that lucky child will go to a special school where Grisha learn to use their talents.”

“You will have the finest clothes, the finest food, whatever your heart desires,” said the man in purple. “Would you like that?”

“It is the greatest way that you may serve your King,” said Ana Kuya, still hovering by the door.

“That is very true,” said the woman in red, pleased and willing to make peace.

The boy and the girl glanced at each other and, because the adults were not paying close attention, they did not see the girl reach out to clasp the boy’s hand or the look that passed between them. The Duke would have recognized that look. He had spent long years on the ravaged northern borders, where the villages were constantly under siege and the peasants fought their battles with little aid from the King or anyone else. He had seen a woman, barefoot and unflinching in her doorway, face down a row of bayonets. He knew the look of a man defending his home with nothing but a rock in his hand.

Chapter 1

STANDING ON THE EDGE of a crowded road, I looked down onto the rolling fields and abandoned farms of the Tula Valley and got my first glimpse of the Shadow Fold. My regiment was two weeks' march from the military encampment at Poliznaya and the autumn sun was warm overhead, but I shivered in my coat as I eyed the haze that lay like a dirty smudge on the horizon.

A heavy shoulder slammed into me from behind. I stumbled and nearly pitched face-first into the muddy road.

"Hey!" shouted the soldier. "Watch yourself!"

"Why don't you watch your fat feet?" I snapped, and took some satisfaction from the surprise that came over his broad face. People, particularly big men carrying big rifles, don't expect lip from a scrawny thing like me. They always look a bit dazed when they get it.

The soldier got over the novelty quickly and gave me a dirty look as he adjusted the pack on his back, then disappeared into the caravan of horses, men, carts, and wagons streaming over the crest of the hill and into the valley below.

I quickened my steps, trying to peer over the crowd. I'd lost sight of the yellow flag of the surveyors' cart hours ago, and I knew I was far behind.

As I walked, I took in the green and gold smells of the autumn wood, the soft breeze at my back. We were on the Vy, the wide road that had once led all the way from Os Alta to the wealthy port cities on Ravka's western coast. But that was before the Shadow Fold.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone was singing. *Singing? What idiot is singing on his way into the Fold?* I glanced again at that smudge on the horizon and had to suppress a shudder. I'd seen the Shadow Fold on many maps, a black slash that had severed Ravka from its only coastline and left it landlocked. Sometimes it was shown as a stain, sometimes as a bleak and shapeless cloud. And then there were the maps that just showed the Shadow Fold as a long, narrow lake and labeled it by its other name, "the Unsea," a name intended to put soldiers and merchants at their ease and encourage crossings.

I snorted. That might fool some fat merchant, but it was little comfort to me.

I tore my attention from the sinister haze hovering in the distance and looked down onto the ruined farms of the Tula. The valley had once been home to some of Ravka's richest estates. One day it was a place where farmers tended crops and sheep grazed in green fields. The next, a dark slash had appeared on the landscape, a swath of nearly impenetrable darkness that grew with every passing year and crawled with horrors. Where the farmers had gone, their herds, their crops, their homes and families, no one knew.

Stop it, I told myself firmly. *You're only making things worse. People have been crossing the Fold for years…usually with massive casualties, but all the same.* I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"No fainting in the middle of the road," said a voice close to my ear as a heavy arm landed across my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. I looked up to see Mal's familiar face, a smile in his bright blue eyes as he fell into step beside me. "C'mon," he said. "One foot in front of the other. You know how it's done."

"You're interfering with my plan."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. Faint, get trampled, grievous injuries all around."

"That sounds like a brilliant plan."

"Ah, but if I'm horribly maimed, I won't be able to cross the Fold."

Mal nodded slowly. "I see. I can shove you under a cart if that would help."

"I'll think about it," I grumbled, but I felt my mood lifting all the same. Despite my best efforts, Mal still had that effect on me. And I wasn't the only one. A pretty blond girl strolled by and waved, throwing Mal a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

"Hey, Ruby," he called. "See you later?"

Ruby giggled and scampered off into the crowd. Mal grinned broadly until he caught my eye roll.

"What? I thought you liked Ruby."

"As it happens, we don't have much to talk about," I said drily. I actually had liked Ruby—at first. When Mal and I left the orphanage at Keramzin to train for our military service in Poliznaya, I'd been nervous about meeting new people. But lots of girls had been excited to befriend

me, and Ruby had been among the most eager. Those friendships lasted as long as it took me to figure out that their only interest in me lay in my proximity to Mal.

Now I watched him stretch his arms expansively and turn his face up to the autumn sky, looking perfectly content. There was even, I noted with some disgust, a little bounce in his step.

"What is wrong with you?" I whispered furiously.

"Nothing," he said, surprised. "I feel great."

"But how can you be so…so jaunty?"

"Jaunty? I've never been jaunty. I hope never to be jaunty."

"Well, then what's all this?" I asked, waving a hand at him. "You look like you're on your way to a really good dinner instead of possible death and dismemberment."

Mal laughed. "You worry too much. The King's sent a whole group of Grisha pyros to cover the skiffs, and even a few of those creepy Heartrenders. We have our rifles," he said, patting the one on his back. "We'll be fine."

"A rifle won't make much difference if there's a bad attack."

Mal gave me a bemused glance. "What's with you lately? You're even grumpier than usual. And you look terrible."

"Thanks," I groused. "I haven't been sleeping well."

"What else is new?"

He was right, of course. I'd never slept well. But it had been even worse over the last few days. Saints knew I had plenty of good reasons to dread going into the Fold, reasons shared by every member of our regiment who had been unlucky enough to be chosen for the crossing. But there was something else, a deeper feeling of unease that I couldn't quite name.

I glanced at Mal. There had been a time when I could have told him anything. "I just…have this feeling."

"Stop worrying so much. Maybe they'll put Mikhael on the skiff. The volcra will take one look at that big juicy belly of his and leave us alone."

Unbidden, a memory came to me: Mal and I, sitting side by side in a chair in the Duke's library, flipping through the pages of a large leather-bound book. We'd happened on an illustration of a volcra: long, filthy claws; leathery wings; and rows of razor-sharp teeth for feasting on human flesh. They were blind from generations spent living and hunting in the

Fold, but legend had it they could smell human blood from miles away. I'd pointed to the page and asked, "What is it holding?"

I could still hear Mal's whisper in my ear. "I think—I think it's a foot." We'd slammed the book shut and run squealing out into the safety of the sunlight….

Without realizing it, I'd stopped walking, frozen in place, unable to shake the memory from my mind. When Mal realized I wasn't with him, he gave a great beleaguered sigh and marched back to me. He rested his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

"I was kidding. No one's going to eat Mikhael."

"I know," I said, staring down at my boots. "You're hilarious."

"Alina, come on. We'll be fine."

"You can't know that."

"Look at me." I willed myself to raise my eyes to his. "I know you're scared. I am, too. But we're going to do this, and we're going to be fine. We always are. Okay?" He smiled, and my heart gave a very loud thud in my chest.

I rubbed my thumb over the scar that ran across the palm of my right hand and took a shaky breath. "Okay," I said grudgingly, and I actually felt myself smiling back.

"Madam's spirits have been restored!" Mal shouted. "The sun can once more shine!"

"Oh will you shut up?"

I turned to give him a punch, but before I could, he'd grabbed hold of me and lifted me off my feet. A clatter of hooves and shouts split the air. Mal yanked me to the side of the road just as a huge black coach roared past, scattering people before it as they ran to avoid the pounding hooves of four black horses. Beside the whip-wielding driver perched two soldiers in charcoal coats.

The Darkling. There was no mistaking his black coach or the uniform of his personal guard.

Another coach, this one lacquered red, rumbled past us at a more leisurely pace.

I looked up at Mal, my heart racing from the close call. "Thanks," I whispered. Mal suddenly seemed to realize that he had his arms around me. He let go and hastily stepped back. I brushed the dust from my coat, hoping he wouldn't notice the flush on my cheeks.

A third coach rolled by, lacquered in blue, and a girl leaned out the window. She had curling black hair and wore a hat of silver fox. She scanned the watching crowd and, predictably, her eyes lingered on Mal.

You were just mooning over him, I chided myself. *Why shouldn't some gorgeous Grisha do the same?*

Her lips curled into a small smile as she held Mal's gaze, watching him over her shoulder until the coach was out of sight. Mal goggled dumbly after her, his mouth slightly open.

"Close your mouth before something flies in," I snapped.

Mal blinked, still looking dazed.

"Did you see that?" a voice bellowed. I turned to see Mikhael loping toward us, wearing an almost comical expression of awe. Mikhael was a huge redhead with a wide face and an even wider neck. Behind him, Dubrov, reedy and dark, hurried to catch up. They were both trackers in Mal's unit and never far from his side.

"Of course I saw it," Mal said, his dopey expression evaporating into a cocky grin. I rolled my eyes.

"She looked right at you!" shouted Mikhael, clapping Mal on the back.

Mal gave a casual shrug, but his smile widened. "So she did," he said smugly.

Dubrov shifted nervously. "They say Grisha girls can put spells on you."

I snorted.

Mikhael looked at me as if he hadn't even known I was there. "Hey, Sticks," he said, and gave me a little jab on the arm. I scowled at the nickname, but he had already turned back to Mal. "You know she'll be staying at camp," he said with a leer.

"I hear the Grisha tent's as big as a cathedral," added Dubrov.

"Lots of nice shadowy nooks," said Mikhael, and actually waggled his brows.

Mal whooped. Without sparing me another glance, the three of them strode off, shouting and shoving one another.

"Great seeing you guys," I muttered under my breath. I readjusted the strap of the satchel slung across my shoulders and started back down the road, joining the last few stragglers down the hill and into Kribirsk. I didn't bother to hurry. I'd probably get yelled at when I finally made it to the Documents Tent, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

I rubbed my arm where Mikhael had punched me. *Sticks*. I hated that name. *You didn't call me Sticks when you were drunk on* kvas *and trying to paw me at the spring bonfire, you miserable oaf*, I thought spitefully.

Kribirsk wasn't much to look at. According to the Senior Cartographer, it had been a sleepy market town in the days before the Shadow Fold, little more than a dusty main square and an inn for weary travelers on the Vy. But now it had become a kind of ramshackle port city, growing up around a permanent military encampment and the dry-docks where the sandskiffs waited to take passengers through the darkness to West Ravka. I passed taverns and pubs and what I was pretty sure were brothels meant to cater to the troops of the King's Army. There were shops selling rifles and crossbows, lamps and torches, all necessary equipment for a trek across the Fold. The little church with its whitewashed walls and gleaming onion domes was in surprisingly good repair. *Or maybe not so surprising*, I considered. Anyone contemplating a trip across the Shadow Fold would be smart to stop and pray.

I found my way to where the surveyors were billeted, deposited my pack on a cot, and hurried over to the Documents Tent. To my relief, the Senior Cartographer was nowhere in sight, and I was able to slip inside unseen.

Entering the white canvas tent, I felt myself relax for the first time since I'd caught sight of the Fold. The Documents Tent was essentially the same in every camp I'd seen, full of bright light and rows of drafting tables where artists and surveyors bent to their work. After the noise and jostle of the journey, there was something soothing about the crackle of paper, the smell of ink, and the soft scratching of nibs and brushes.

I pulled my sketchbook from my coat pocket and slid onto a workbench beside Alexei, who turned to me and whispered irritably, "Where have you been?"

"Nearly getting trampled by the Darkling's coach," I replied, grabbing a clean piece of paper and flipping through my sketches to try to find a suitable one to copy. Alexei and I were both junior cartographers' assistants and, as part of our training, we had to submit two finished sketches or renderings at the end of every day.

Alexei drew in a sharp breath. "Really? Did you actually see him?"

"*Actually*, I was too busy trying not to die."

“There are worse ways to go.” He caught sight of the sketch of a rocky valley I was about to start copying. “Ugh. Not that one.” He flipped through my sketchbook to an elevation of a mountain ridge and tapped it with his finger. “There.”

I barely had time to put pen to paper before the Senior Cartographer entered the tent and came swooping down the aisle, observing our work as he passed.

“I hope that’s the second sketch you’re starting, Alina Starkov.”

“Yes,” I lied. “Yes, it is.”

As soon as the Cartographer had passed on, Alexei whispered, “Tell me about the coach.”

“I have to finish my sketches.”

“Here,” he said in exasperation, sliding one of his sketches over to me.

“He’ll know it’s your work.”

“It’s not that good. You should be able to pass it off as yours.”

“Now there’s the Alexei I know and tolerate,” I grumbled, but I didn’t give back the sketch. Alexei was one of the most talented assistants and he knew it.

Alexei extracted every last detail from me about the three Grisha coaches. I was grateful for the sketch, so I did my best to satisfy his curiosity as I finished up my elevation of the mountain ridge and worked in my thumb measurements of some of the highest peaks.

By the time we were finished, dusk was falling. We handed in our work and walked to the mess tent, where we stood in line for muddy stew ladled out by a sweaty cook and found seats with some of the other surveyors.

I passed the meal in silence, listening to Alexei and the others exchange camp gossip and jittery talk about tomorrow’s crossing. Alexei insisted that I retell the story of the Grisha coaches, and it was met by the usual mix of fascination and fear that greeted any mention of the Darkling.

“He’s not natural,” said Eva, another assistant; she had pretty green eyes that did little to distract from her piglike nose. “None of them are.”

Alexei sniff ed. “Please spare us your superstition, Eva.”

“It was a Darkling who made the Shadow Fold to begin with.”

“That was hundreds of years ago!” protested Alexei. “And that Darkling was completely mad.”

“This one is just as bad.”

“Peasant,” Alexei said, and dismissed her with a wave. Eva gave him an affronted look and deliberately turned away from him to talk to her friends.

I stayed quiet. I was more a peasant than Eva, despite her superstitions. It was only by the Duke’s charity that I could read and write, but by unspoken agreement, Mal and I avoided mentioning Keramzin.

As if on cue, a raucous burst of laughter pulled me from my thoughts. I looked over my shoulder. Mal was holding court at a rowdy table of trackers.

Alexei followed my glance. “How did you two become friends anyway?”

“We grew up together.”

“You don’t seem to have much in common.”

I shrugged. “I guess it’s easy to have a lot in common when you’re kids.” Like loneliness, and memories of parents we were meant to forget, and the pleasure of escaping chores to play tag in our meadow.

Alexei looked so skeptical that I had to laugh. “He wasn’t always the Amazing Mal, expert tracker and seducer of Grisha girls.”

Alexei’s jaw dropped. “He seduced a Grisha girl?”

“No, but I’m sure he will,” I muttered.

“So what *was* he like?”

“He was short and pudgy and afraid of baths,” I said with some satisfaction.

Alexei glanced at Mal. “I guess things change.”

I rubbed my thumb over the scar in my palm. “I guess they do.”

We cleared our plates and drifted out of the mess tent into the cool night. On the way back to the barracks, we took a detour so that we could walk by the Grisha camp. The Grisha pavilion really was the size of a cathedral, covered in black silk, its blue, red, and purple pennants flying high above. Hidden somewhere behind it were the Darkling’s tents, guarded by Corporalki Heartrenders and the Darkling’s personal guard.

When Alexei had looked his fill, we wended our way back to our quarters. Alexei got quiet and started cracking his knuckles, and I knew we were both thinking about tomorrow’s crossing. Judging by the gloomy mood in the barracks, we weren’t alone. Some people were already on their cots, sleeping—or trying to—while others huddled by lamplight, talking in low tones. A few sat clutching their icons, praying to their Saints.

I unfurled my bedroll on a narrow cot, removed my boots, and hung up my coat. Then I wriggled down into the fur-lined blankets and stared up at the roof, waiting for sleep. I stayed that way for a long time, until the lamplights had all been extinguished and the sounds of conversation gave way to soft snores and the rustle of bodies.

Tomorrow, if everything went as planned, we would pass safely through to West Ravka, and I would get my first glimpse of the True Sea. There, Mal and the other trackers would hunt for red wolves and sea foxes and other coveted creatures that could only be found in the west. I would stay with the cartographers in Os Kervo to finish my training and help draft what ever information we managed to glean in the Fold. And then, of course, I'd have to cross the Fold again in order to return home. But it was hard to think that far ahead.

I was still wide awake when I heard it. *Tap tap.* Pause. *Tap.* Then again: *Tap tap*. Pause. *Tap.*

"What's going on?" mumbled Alexei drowsily from the cot nearest mine.

"Nothing," I whispered, already slipping out of my bedroll and shoving my feet into my boots.

I grabbed my coat and crept out of the barracks as quietly as I could. As I opened the door I heard a giggle, and a female voice called from somewhere in the dark room, "If it's that tracker, tell him to come inside and keep me warm."

"If he wants to catch *tsifil*, I'm sure you'll be his first stop," I said sweetly, and slipped out into the night.

The cold air stung my cheeks and I buried my chin in my collar, wishing I'd taken the time to grab my scarf and gloves. Mal was sitting on the rickety steps, his back to me. Beyond him, I could see Mikhael and Dubrov passing a bottle back and forth beneath the glowing lights of the footpath.

I scowled. "Please tell me you didn't just wake me up to inform me that you're going to the Grisha tent. What do you want, advice?"

"You weren't sleeping. You were lying awake worrying."

"Wrong. I was planning how to sneak into the Grisha pavilion and snag myself a cute Corporalnik."

Mal laughed. I hesitated by the door. This was the hardest part of being around him—other than the way he made my heart do clumsy acrobatics. I

hated hiding how much the stupid things he did hurt me, but I hated the idea of him finding out even more. I thought about just turning around and going back inside. Instead, I swallowed my jealousy and sat down beside him.

"I hope you brought me something nice," I said. "Alina's Secrets of Seduction do not come cheap."

He grinned. "Can you put it on my tab?"

"I suppose. But only because I know you're good for it."

I peered into the dark and watched Dubrov take a swig from the bottle and then lurch forward. Mikhael put his arm out to steady him, and the sounds of their laughter floated back to us on the night air.

Mal shook his head and sighed. "He always tries to keep up with Mikhael. He'll probably end up puking on my boots."

"Serves you right," I said. "So what *are* you doing here?" When we'd first started our military service a year ago, Mal had visited me almost every night. But he hadn't come by in months.

He shrugged. "I don't know. You looked so miserable at dinner."

I was surprised he'd noticed. "Just thinking about the crossing," I said carefully. It wasn't exactly a lie. I *was* terrified of entering the Fold, and Mal definitely didn't need to know that Alexei and I had been talking about him. "But I'm touched by your concern."

"Hey," he said with a grin, "I worry."

"If you're lucky, a volcra will have me for breakfast tomorrow and then you won't have to fret anymore."

"You know I'd be lost without you."

"You've never been lost in your life," I scoff ed. I was the mapmaker, but Mal could find true north blindfolded and standing on his head.

He bumped his shoulder against mine. "You know what I mean."

"Sure," I said. But I didn't. Not really.

We sat in silence, watching our breath make plumes in the cold air.

Mal studied the toes of his boots and said, "I guess I'm nervous, too."

I nudged him with my elbow and said with confidence I didn't feel, "If we can take on Ana Kuya, we can handle a few volcra."

"If I remember right, the last time we crossed Ana Kuya, you got your ears boxed and we both ended up mucking out the stables."

I winced. "I'm trying to be reassuring. You could at least pretend I'm succeeding."

“You know the funny thing?” he asked. “I actually miss her sometimes.”

I did my best to hide my astonishment. We’d spent more than ten years of our lives in Keramzin, but usually I got the impression that Mal wanted to forget everything about the place, maybe even me. There he’d been another lost refugee, another orphan made to feel grateful for every mouthful of food, every used pair of boots. In the army, he’d carved out a real place for himself where no one needed to know that he’d once been an unwanted little boy.

“Me too,” I admitted. “We could write to her.”

“Maybe,” Mal said.

Suddenly, he reached out and took hold of my hand. I tried to ignore the little jolt that went through me. “This time tomorrow, we’ll be sitting in the harbor at Os Kervo, looking out at the ocean and drinking *kvas.*”

I glanced at Dubrov weaving back and forth and smiled. “Is Dubrov buying?”

“Just you and me,” Mal said.

“Really?”

“It’s always just you and me, Alina.”

For a moment, it seemed like it was true. The world was this step, this circle of lamplight, the two of us suspended in the dark.

“Come on!” bellowed Mikhael from the path.

Mal started like a man waking from a dream. He gave my hand a last squeeze before he dropped it. “Gotta go,” he said, his brash grin sliding back into place. “Try to get some sleep.”

He hopped lightly from the stairs and jogged off to join his friends. “Wish me luck!” he called over his shoulder.

“Good luck,” I said automatically and then wanted to kick myself. *Good luck? Have a lovely time, Mal. Hope you find a pretty Grisha, fall deeply in love, and make lots of gorgeous, disgustingly talented babies together.*

I sat frozen on the steps, watching them disappear down the path, still feeling the warm pressure of Mal’s hand in mine. *Oh well,* I thought as I got to my feet. *Maybe he’ll fall into a ditch on his way there.*

I edged back into the barracks, closed the door tightly behind me, and gratefully snuggled into my bedroll.

Would that black-haired Grisha girl sneak out of the pavilion to meet Mal? I pushed the thought away. It was none of my business, and really, I

didn’t want to know. Mal had never looked at me the way he’d looked at that girl or even the way he looked at Ruby, and he never would. But the fact that we were still friends was more important than any of that.

For how long? said a nagging voice in my head. Alexei was right: things change. Mal had changed for the better. He’d gotten handsomer, braver, cockier. And I’d gotten…taller. I sighed and rolled onto my side. I wanted to believe that Mal and I would always be friends, but I had to face the fact that we were on different paths. Lying in the dark, waiting for sleep, I wondered if those paths would just keep taking us further and further apart, and if a day might come when we would be strangers to each other once again.

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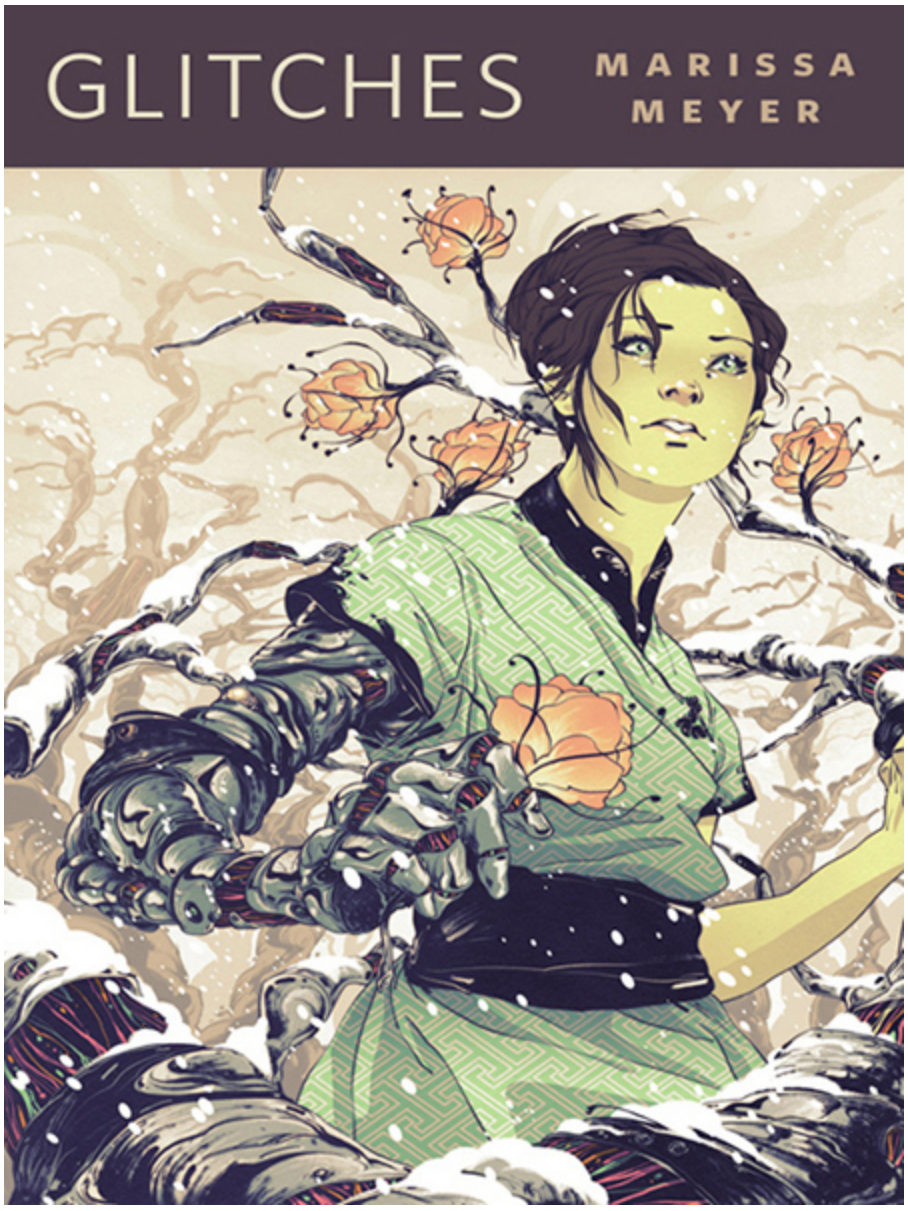
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“Are you ready to meet your new family?”

She tore her gaze away from the window, where snow was heaped up on bamboo fences and a squat android was clearing a path through the slush, and looked at the man seated opposite her. Though he’d been kind to her throughout their trip, two full days of being passed between a hover, a maglev train, two passenger ships, and yet another hover, he still had a nervous smile that made her fidget.

Plus, she kept forgetting his name.

“I don’t remember the old family,” she said, adjusting her heavy left leg so that it didn’t stick out quite so far between their seats.

His lips twisted awkwardly into an expression that was probably meant to be reassuring, and this ended their conversation. His attention fell down to a device he never stopped looking at, with a screen that cast a greenish glow over his face. He wasn’t a very old man, but his eyes always seemed tired and his clothes didn’t fit him right. Though he’d been clean-cut when he first came to claim her, he was now in need of a razor.

She returned her gaze to the snow-covered street. The suburb struck her as crowded and confused. A series of short one-story shacks would be followed by a mansion with a frozen water fountain in its courtyard and red-tiled roofs. After that, a series of clustered town houses and maybe a run-down apartment complex, before more tiny shacks took over. It all looked like someone had taken every kind of residence they could think of and spilled them across a grid of roads, not caring where anything landed.

She suspected that her new home wasn’t anything like the rolling farmland they’d left behind in Europe, but she’d been in such a foggy-brained daze at the time that she couldn’t remember much of anything before the train ride. Except that it had been snowing there, too. She was already sick of the snow and the cold. They made her bones ache where her fleshy parts were connected to her steel prosthetics.

She swiveled her gaze back toward the man seated across from her. “Are we almost there?”

He nodded without looking up. “Almost, Cinder.”

Enfolding her fingers around the scar tissue on her wrist, she waited, hoping he would say something else to ease her nerves, but he didn't seem the type to notice anyone's anxiety above his own. She imagined calling him *Dad*, but the word was laughably unfamiliar, even inside her head. She couldn't even compare him with her real father, as her memory had been reduced to a blank slate during the intrusive surgeries and all she had left of her parents was their sterile identity profiles, with plain photos that held no recognition and a tag at the top labeling them as **DECEASED**. They'd been killed in the hover crash that had also claimed her leg and hand.

As confirmed by all official records, there was no one else. Cinder's grandparents were also dead. She had no siblings. No aunts or uncles or friends—at least, none willing to claim her. Perhaps there wasn't a human being in all of Europe who would have taken her in, and that's why they'd had to search as far as New Beijing before they found her a replacement family.

She squinted, straining to remember who *they* were. The faceless people who had pulled her from the wreckage and turned her into *this*. Doctors and surgeons, no doubt. Scientists. Programmers. There must have been a social worker involved, but she couldn't recall for sure. Her memory gave her only dizzy glimpses of the French countryside and this stranger sitting across from her, entranced by the device in his hands.

Her new stepfather.

The hover began to slow, drifting toward the curb. Its nose hit a snowbank and it came to a sudden shuddering stop. Cinder grabbed the bar overhead, but the hover had already settled down, slightly off-kilter in the packed snow.

"Here we are," said the man, eyes twinkling as the hover door slid open.

She stayed plastered to her seat, her hand still gripping the bar, as a gust of icy wind swirled around them. They'd arrived at one of the tiny shack houses, one with peeling paint and a gutter that hung loose beneath the weight of the snow. Still, it was a sweet little house, all white with a red roof and enough dead branches sticking up from the ground that Cinder could almost imagine a garden come springtime.

The man paid the hover with a swipe of his wrist, then stepped out onto a pathway that had been plowed down to a sheet of ice. The door to the house opened before he'd taken a step and two girls about Cinder's own age

came barreling down the front steps, squealing. The man crouched down on the pathway, holding out his arms as the girls launched themselves into him.

From her place inside the hover, Cinder heard the man laugh for the first time.

A woman appeared inside the doorway, belting a quilted robe around her waist. “Girls, don’t suffocate your father. He’s had a long trip.”

“Don’t listen to your mother, just this once. You can suffocate me all you like.” He kissed his daughters on the tops of their heads, then stood, keeping a firm grip on their hands. “Would you like to meet your new sister?” he asked, turning back to face the hover. He seemed surprised at the empty pathway behind him. “Come on out, Cinder.”

She shivered and pried her hand away from the safety bar. Sliding toward the door, she tried to be graceful stepping out onto the curb, but the distance to the ground was shorter than she’d expected and her heavy leg was inflexible as it crunched through the compact ice. She cried out and stumbled, barely catching herself on the hover’s doorframe.

The man hurried back toward her, holding her up as well as he could by the arm, one hand gripping her metal fingers. “It’s all right, perfectly natural. Your muscles are weak right now, and it will take time for your wiring to fully integrate with your nervous system.”

Cinder stared hard at the ground, shivering both from cold and embarrassment. She couldn’t help finding irony in the man’s words, though she dared not laugh at them—what did integrated wiring have to do with being perfectly natural?

“Cinder,” the man continued, coaxing her forward, “this is my eldest daughter, Pearl, and my youngest, Peony. And that is their lovely mother, Adri. Your new stepmother.”

She peered up at his two daughters from behind a curtain of fine brown hair.

They were both staring openly at her metal hand.

Cinder tried to shrink away, but then the youngest girl, Peony, asked, “Did it hurt when they put it on?”

Steady on her feet again, Cinder pried her hand out of the man’s hold and tucked it against her side. “I don’t remember.”

“She was unconscious for the surgeries, Peony,” said the man.

“Can I touch it?” she asked, her hand already inching forward.

“That’s enough, Garan. People are watching.”

Cinder jumped at the shrill voice, but when she looked up, her "stepmother" was not looking at them, but at the house across the street.

Garan. That was the man's name. Cinder committed it to memory as she followed Adri's gaze and saw a man staring at her through his front window.

"It's freezing out here," said Adri. "Pearl, go find the android and have her bring in your father's luggage. Peony, you can show Cinder to her room."

"You mean *my* room," said Pearl, her lip curling as she began to shuffle back toward the house. "I'm the oldest. I shouldn't have to share with Peony."

To Cinder's surprise, the younger girl turned and latched on to her arm, tugging her forward. She nearly slipped on the ice and would have been embarrassed again, except she noticed that Peony's feet were slipping around too as she pulled Cinder ahead. "Pearl can take the room," she said. "I don't mind sharing with Cinder."

Adri's face was taut as she looked down at their intertwined elbows. "Don't argue with me, either of you."

Condensation sprang up on Cinder's steel hand as she went from the chilled air to the house's warm entryway, but Peony didn't seem to notice as she led her toward the back of the house.

"I don't know why Pearl's upset," she said, shouldering open a door. "This is the smallest room in the house. Our bedroom is much nicer." Releasing Cinder, she went to pull open the blinds on the single small window. "But look, you can see the neighbor's cherry tree. It's really pretty when it blooms."

Cinder didn't follow her to the window, instead casting her gaze around the room. It seemed small, but it was larger than the sleeper car on the maglev train and she had no prior bedrooms to compare it with. A mattress sat in the corner with blankets tucked neatly around its sides, and a small dresser stood empty on the nearest wall.

"Pearl used to have a netscreen in here, but Mom moved it into the kitchen. You can come watch mine whenever you want to, though. Do you like *Nightmare Island*? It's my favorite drama."

"Nightmare Island?" No sooner had Cinder said it than her brain started streaming data across her vision. ***A popular drama aimed at teenage girls***

that includes a cast of thirty-six young celebrities who are caught up in lies, betrayal, romance, and the scheme of a crazed scientist who—

"Don't tell me you've never heard of it!"

Cinder scrunched her shoulders beside her ears. "I've heard of it," she said, blinking the data away. She wondered if there was a way to get her brain to stop doing that every time she heard an unfamiliar phrase. It had been happening almost nonstop since she'd woken up from the surgery. "That's the show with the crazed scientist, right? I've never seen it, though."

Peony looked relieved. "That's fine, I have a subscription to the whole feed. We'll watch it together." She bounced on her feet and Cinder had to tear her gaze away from the girl's excitement. Her gaze landed on a box half-tucked behind the door. A small pronged hand was hanging over the edge.

"What's this?" she said, leaning forward. She kept her hands locked behind her back.

"Oh, that's Iko." Abandoning the window, Peony crouched down and scooted the box out from the wall. It was filled with random android parts all jumbled together—the spherical body took up most of the space, along with a glossy white head, a sensor lens, a clear bag filled with screws and program chips. "She had some sort of glitch in her personality chip and Mom heard that she could get more money for her if she sold her off in pieces rather than as a whole, but nobody wanted them. Now she just sits here, in a box."

Cinder shuddered, wondering how common glitches were in androids. Or cyborgs.

"I really liked Iko when she was working. She was a lot more fun than that boring garden android." Peony picked up the thin metal arm with the three prongs and held it up so that the fingers clicked together. "We used to play dress-up together." Her eyes lit up. "Hey, do *you* like playing dress-up?"

Adri appeared in the doorway just as Cinder's brain was informing her that "dress-up" was ***a game often played by children in which costumes or adult clothes are used to aid in the process of imagination…***

Obviously, she thought, sending the message away.

"Well, Cinder?" said Adri, tightening her robe's belt again and surveying the small room with a pinched face. "Garan told me you wouldn't

want for much. I hope this meets your expectations?”

She looked around again, at the bed, the dresser, the branches that would someday bloom in the neighbor’s yard. “Yes, thank you.”

Adri rubbed her hands together. “Good. I hope you’ll let me know if you need anything. We’re glad to share our home with you, knowing what you’ve been through.”

Cinder licked her lips, thinking to say thank you again, but then a small orange light flickered in her optobionics and she found herself frowning. This was something new and she had no idea what it meant.

Maybe it was a sign of a brain malfunction. Maybe this was a glitch.

“Come along, Peony,” said Adri, stepping back into the hall. “I could use some help in the kitchen.”

“But Mom, Cinder and I were going to—”

“*Now*, Peony.”

Scowling, Peony thrust the android arm into Cinder’s hand and followed after her mother.

Cinder held up the limb and shook it at their backs, making the lifeless fingers wave goodbye.

Six nights after she’d arrived at her new home, Cinder awoke on fire. She cried out, tumbling off the mattress and landing in a heap with a blanket wrapped like a tourniquet around her bionic leg. She lay gasping for a minute, rubbing her hands over her arms to try and smother the flames until she finally realized that they weren’t real.

A warning about escalating temperatures flashed in her gaze and she forced herself to lie still long enough to dismiss it from her vision. Her skin was clammy, beads of sweat dripping back into her hair. Even her metal limbs felt warm to the touch.

When her breathing was under control, she pulled herself up onto weak legs and hobbled to the window, thrusting it open and drinking in the winter air. The snow had started to melt, turning into slush in the daytime before hardening into glistening ice at night. Cinder stood for a moment, reveling in the frosty air on her skin and entranced by how a nearly full moon turned the world ghostly yellow. She tried to remember the nightmare, but her memory gave her only fire and, after a minute, the sensation of sandpaper in her mouth.

Shutting the window, she crept toward her bedroom door, careful not to trip on the bag of secondhand clothes Pearl had begrudgingly given to her the day before after her father had lectured her about charity.

She heard Adri's voice before she reached the kitchen and paused, one hand balancing her on the wall as her body threatened to tip toward its heavier left side.

As she strained to hear, Adri's voice grew steadily louder, and Cinder realized with a jolt that Adri wasn't *speaking* louder, but rather something in her own head was adjusting the volume on her hearing. She rubbed her palm against her ear, feeling like there was a bug in it.

"Four months, Garan," Adri said. "We're behind by four months and Suki-jiě has already threatened to start auctioning off our things if we don't pay her soon."

"She's not going to auction off our things," said Garan, his voice a strange combination of soothing and strained. Garan's voice had already become unfamiliar to Cinder's ear. He spent his days out in a one-room shed behind the house, "tinkering," Peony said, though she didn't seem to know what exactly he was tinkering with. He came in to join his family for meals, but hardly ever talked and Cinder wondered how much he heard, either. His expression always suggested his mind was very far away.

"Why *shouldn't* she sell off our things? I'm sure I would in her place!" Adri said. "Whenever I have to leave the house, I come home wondering if this will be the day our things are gone and our locks are changed. We can't keep living on her hospitality."

"It's going to be all right, love. Our luck is changing."

"Our luck!" Adri's voice spiked in Cinder's ear and she flinched at the shrillness, quickly urging the volume to descend again. It obeyed her command, through sheer willpower. She held her breath, wondering what other secrets her brain was keeping from her.

"*How* is our luck changing? Because you won a silver ribbon at that fair in Sydney last month? Your stupid awards aren't going to keep food on this table, and now you've brought home one more mouth—and a *cyborg* at that!"

"We talked about this…"

"No, *you* talked about this. I want to support you, Garan, but these schemes of yours are going to cost us everything. We have our own girls to think about. I can't even afford new shoes for Pearl and now there's this

creature in the house who's going to need…what? A new *foot* every six months?"

Shriveling against the wall, Cinder glanced down at her metal foot, the toes looking awkward and huge beside the fleshy ones—the ones with bone and skin and toenails.

"Of course not. She'll be fine for a year or two," said Garan.

Adri stifled a hysterical laugh.

"And her leg and fingers can be adjusted as she grows," Garan continued. "We shouldn't need replacements for those until she reaches adulthood."

Cinder lifted her hand into the faint light coming down the hallway, inspecting the joints. She hadn't noticed how the knuckles were fitted together before, the digits nestled inside each other. So this hand could grow, just like her human hand did.

Because she would be stuck with these limbs forever. She would be cyborg forever.

"Well how *comforting*," said Adri. "I'm glad to see you've given this so much thought."

"Have faith, love."

Cinder heard a chair being pushed back and backed up into the hallway, but all that followed was the sound of running water from the faucet. She pressed her fingers over her mouth, trying to feel the water through psychokinesis, but even *her* brain couldn't quench her thirst on sound alone.

"I have something special to reveal at the Tokyo Fair in March," Garan said. "It's going to change everything. In the meantime, you must be patient with the child. She only wants to belong here. Perhaps she can help you with the housework, until we can get that android replaced?"

Adri scoffed. "Help me? What can she do, dragging that monstrosity around?"

Cinder cringed. She heard a cup being set down, then a kiss. "Give her a chance. Maybe she'll surprise you."

She ducked away at the first hint of a footstep, creeping back into her room and shutting the door. She felt that she could have wept from thirst, but her eyes stayed as dry as her tongue.

“Here, you put on the green one,” said Peony, tossing a bundle of green and gold silk into Cinder’s arms. She barely caught it, the thin material slipping like water over her hands. “We don’t have any real ball gowns, but these are just as pretty. This is my favorite.” Peony held up another garment, a swath of purple and red fabric decorated with soaring cranes. She strung her bony arms through the enormous sleeves and pulled the material tight around her waist, holding it in place while she dug through the pile of clothes for a long silver sash and belted it around her middle. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

Cinder nodded uncertainly—although the silk kimonos were perhaps the finest things she’d ever felt, Peony looked ridiculous in hers. The hem of the gown dragged a foot on the floor, the sleeves dangled almost to her knees, and street clothes still peeked through at her neck and wrists, ruining the illusion. It almost looked like the gown was trying to eat her.

“Well put yours on!” said Peony. “Here, this is the sash I usually put with that one.” She pulled out a black and violet band.

Cinder tentatively stuck her hands into the sleeves, taking extra care that no screws or joints caught the fine material. “Won’t Adri be mad?”

“Pearl and I play dress-up all the time,” said Peony, looping the sash around Cinder’s waist. “And how are we supposed to go to the ball if we don’t have any beautiful dresses to wear?”

Cinder raised her arms, shaking the sleeves back. “I don’t think my hand goes with this one.”

Peony laughed, though Cinder hadn’t meant it to be funny. Peony seemed to find amusement with almost everything she said.

“Just pretend you’re wearing gloves,” said Peony. “Then no one will know.” Grabbing Cinder by the hand, she pulled her across the hall and into the bathroom so they could see themselves in the mirror. Cinder looked no less absurd than Peony, with her fine, mousy hair hanging limp past her shoulders and awkward metal fingers poking out of the left sleeve.

“Perfect,” said Peony, beaming. “Now we’re at the ball. Iko used to always be the prince, but I guess we’ll have to pretend.”

“What ball?”

Peony stared back at her in the mirror as if Cinder had just sprouted a metal tail. “The ball for the peace festival! It’s this huge event we have every year—the festival is down in the city center and then in the evening they have the ball up at the palace. I’ve never gone for real, but Pearl will be thirteen next year so she’ll get to go for the first time.” She sighed and

spun out into the hallway. Cinder followed, her walking made even more cumbersome than usual with the kimono trailing on the ground.

"When I go for the first time, I want a purple dress with a skirt so big I can hardly fit through the door."

"That sounds uncomfortable."

Peony wrinkled her nose. "Well it has to be spectacular, or else Prince Kai won't notice me, and then what's the point?"

Cinder was almost hesitant to ask as she followed flouncing Peony back into her bedroom—"Who's Prince Kai?"

Peony spun toward her so fast, she tripped on the skirts of Adri's kimono and fell, screaming, onto her bed. "*Who's Prince Kai?*" she yelled, struggling to sit back up. "Only my future husband! Honestly, don't girls in Europe know about him?"

Cinder teetered between her two feet, unable to answer the question. After twelve whole days living with Peony and her family, she already had more memories of the Eastern Commonwealth than she had of Europe. She hadn't the faintest idea what—or who—the girls in Europe obsessed over.

"Here," said Peony, scrambling across her messy blankets and grabbing a portscreen off the nightstand. "He's my greeter."

She turned the screen on and a boy's voice said, "Hello, Peony." Cinder shuffled forward and took the small device from her. The screen showed a boy of twelve or thirteen years old wearing a tailored suit that seemed ironic with his shaggy black hair. He was waving at someone—Cinder guessed the photo was from some sort of press event.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" said Peony. "Every night I tie a red string around my finger and say his name five times because this girl in my class told me that will tie our destinies together. I know he's my soul mate."

Cinder listed her head, still staring at the boy. Her optobionics were scanning him, finding the picture in some database in her head, and, this time, she expected the stream of text that began to filter through her brain. His ID number, his birth date, his full name and title. Prince Kaito, Crown Prince of the Eastern Commonwealth.

"His arms are too long for his body," she said after a while, finally picking up on what didn't feel right about the picture. "They're not proportionate."

"What are you talking about?" Peony snatched the port away and stared at it for a minute before tossing it onto her pillow. "Honestly, who cares

about his arms?”

Cinder shrugged, unable to smother a slight grin. “I was only saying.”

Harrumphing, Peony swung her legs around and hopped off the bed. “Fine, whatever. Our hover is here. We’d better get going or we’ll be late for the ball, where *I* am going to dance with His Imperial Highness, and *you* can dance with whoever you would like to. Maybe another prince. We should make one up for you. Do you want Prince Kai to have a brother?”

“What are you two doing?”

Cinder spun around. Adri was looming in the doorway—again her footsteps had gone unnoticed and Cinder was beginning to wonder if Adri was really a ghost that floated through the hallways rather than walked.

“We’re going to the ball!” Peony said.

Adri’s face flushed as her gaze dropped down the silk kimono hanging off Cinder’s shoulders. “Take that off this instant!”

Shrinking back, Cinder instantly began undoing the knot that Peony had tied around her waist.

“Peony, what are you thinking? These garments are expensive and if she got snagged—if the lining—” Stepping forward, she grabbed the collar of the dress, peeling it off Cinder as soon as the sash was free.

“But you used to let Pearl and me—”

“Things are *different* now, and you are to leave my things alone. Both of you!”

Scowling, Peony started unwrapping her own dress. Cinder bit the inside of her cheek, feeling oddly vulnerable without the heavy silk draped around her and sick to her stomach with guilt, though she wasn’t sure what she had to be guilty about.

“Cinder.”

She dared to meet Adri’s gaze.

“I came to tell you that if you are to be a part of this household, I will expect you to take on some responsibilities. You’re old enough to help Pearl with her chores.”

She nodded, almost eager to have something to do with her time when Peony wasn’t around. “Of course. I don’t want to be any trouble.”

Adri’s mouth pursed into a thin line. “I won’t ask you to do any dusting until I can trust you to move with a bit of grace. Is that hand water resistant?”

Cinder held out her bionic hand, splaying out the fingers. “I…I think so. But it might rust…after a while…”

“Fine, no dishes or scrubbing, then. Can you at least cook?”

Cinder racked her brain, wondering if it could feed her recipes as easily as it fed her useless definitions. “I never have before, that I can remember. But I’m sure…”

Peony threw her arms into the air. “Why don’t we just get Iko fixed and then *she* can do all the housework like she’s supposed to?”

Adri’s eyes smoldered as she looked between her daughter and Cinder. “Well,” she said, finally, snatching up the two kimonos and draping them over her arm. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find *some use* for you. In the meantime, why don’t you leave my daughter alone so she can get some of her schoolwork accomplished?”

“What?” said Peony. “But we haven’t even gotten to the ball yet.”

Cinder didn’t wait to hear the argument she expected to follow. “Yes, stepmother,” she murmured, ducking her head. She slipped past Adri and made her way to her own room.

Her insides were writhing but she couldn’t pinpoint the overruling emotion. Hot anger, because it wasn’t her fault that her new leg was awkward and heavy, and how was she to know Adri wouldn’t want them playing in her things?

But also mortification because maybe she really was useless. She was eleven years old, but she didn’t know anything, other than the bits of data that seemed to serve no purpose other than to keep her from looking like a complete idiot. If she’d had any skills before, she had no idea what they had been. She’d lost them now.

Sighing, she shut her bedroom door and slumped against it.

The room hadn’t changed much in the almost two weeks since she’d come to call it home, other than the cast-off clothes that had been put into the dresser drawers, a pair of boots tossed into a corner, the blankets bundled up in a ball at the foot of her bed.

Her eyes landed on the box of android parts that hadn’t been moved from their spot behind the door. The dead sensor, the spindly arms.

There was a bar code printed on the back of the torso that she hadn’t noticed before. She barely noticed it then, except that her distracted brain was searching for the random numbers, downloading the android’s make

and model information. Parts list. Estimated value. Maintenance and repair manual.

Something familiar stirred inside her, like she already knew this android. How its parts fit together, how its mechanics and programming all functioned as a whole. Or no, this wasn't familiarity, but…a connectedness. Like she knew the android intimately. Like it was an extension of her.

She pushed herself off the door, her skin tingling.

Perhaps she had one useful skill after all.

It took three days, during which she emerged from her room only to sit for meals with her new family and, once, to play in the snow with Peony while Adri and Pearl were at the market. Her metal limbs had frosted over with cold by the time they were done, but coming inside to a pot of green tea and the flush of shared laughter had quickly warmed her back up.

Adri had not asked Cinder to take on any household chores again, and Cinder imagined it seemed a lost cause to her stepmother. She stayed hopeful though, as the jumble of android pieces gradually formed into something recognizable. A hollow plastic body atop wide treads, two skinny arms, a squat head with nothing but a cyclops sensor for a face. The sensor had given her the most trouble and she had to redo the wiring twice, triple-checking the diagram that had downloaded across her eyesight, before she felt confident she'd gotten it right.

If only it worked. If only she could show to Adri, and even Garan, that she wasn't a useless addition to their family after all. That she was grateful they'd taken her in when no one else would. That she wanted to belong to them.

She was sitting cross-legged on her bed with the window open behind her, allowing in a chilled but pleasant breeze, when she inserted the final touch. The small personality chip clicked into place and Cinder held her breath, half-expecting the android to perk up and swivel around and start talking to her, until she remembered that she would need to be charged before she could function.

Feeling her excitement wane from the anticlimactic finale, Cinder released a slow breath and fell back onto her mattress, mentally exhausted.

A knock thunked against the door.

"Come in," she called, not bothering to move as the door creaked open.

“I was just wondering if you wanted to come watch—” Peony fell silent and Cinder managed to lift her head to see the girl gaping wide-eyed at the android. “Is that…Iko?”

Grinning, Cinder braced herself on her elbows. “She still needs to be charged, but I think she’ll work.”

Jaw still hanging open, Peony crept into the room. Though only nine years old, she was already well over a foot taller than the squat robot. “How…*how?* How did you fix it?”

“I had to borrow some tools from your dad.” Cinder gestured to a pile of wrenches and screwdrivers in the corner. She didn’t bother to mention that he hadn’t been in his workshop behind the house when she’d gone to find them. It almost felt like theft and that thought terrified her, but it wasn’t theft. She wasn’t going to keep the tools, and she was sure Garan would be delighted when he saw she’d fixed the android.

“That’s not…” Peony shook her head and finally looked at Cinder. “You fixed her by yourself?”

Cinder shrugged, not sure whether she should feel proud or uncomfortable at the look Peony was giving her. “It wasn’t that hard,” she said. “I had…I can download…information. Instructions. Into my head. And I figured out how to get the android’s blueprint to go across my vision so I could…” She trailed off, realizing that what she’d been sure was a most useful skill was also one more strange eccentricity her body could claim. One more side effect of being cyborg.

But Peony’s eyes were twinkling. “You’re kidding,” she said, picking up one of Iko’s hands and waggling it around. Cinder had been sure to thoroughly grease it so the joints wouldn’t seize up. “What else can you do?”

“Um.” Cinder hunched her shoulders, considering. “I can…make stuff louder. I mean, not really, but I can adjust my hearing so it seems louder. Or quieter. I could probably mute my hearing if I wanted to.”

Peony laughed. “That’s brilliant! You’d never have to hear Mom when she’s yelling! Aw, I’m so jealous!” Beaming, she started to drag Iko toward the door. “Come on, there’s a charging station in the hallway!”

Cinder hopped off the bed and followed her to a docking station at the end of the hall. Peony plugged Iko in and, instantly, a faint blue light started to glow around the plug.

Peony had raised hopeful eyes to Cinder when the front door opened and Garan stumbled into the hallway, his hair dripping. He wasn't wearing his coat.

He started when he saw the girls standing there. "Peony," he said, short of breath. "Where's your mother?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "In the kitchen, I thi—"

"Go fetch her. Quickly, please."

Peony stalled, her face clouding with worry, before hurrying toward the kitchen.

Intertwining her fingers, Cinder slid in closer to the android. It was the first time she'd been alone with Garan since their long trip and she expected him to say something, to ask how she was getting along or if there was anything she needed—he'd certainly asked that plenty of times while they were traveling—but he hardly seemed to notice her standing there.

"I fixed your android," she said finally, her voice squeaking a little. She grabbed the android's limp arm, as if to prove it, though the hand did nothing but droop.

Garan turned his distraught gaze on her and looked for a moment like he was going to ask who she was and what she was doing in his house. He opened his mouth but it took a long time for any words to form.

"Oh, child."

She frowned at the obvious pity. This was not a reaction she'd expected—he was not impressed, he was not grateful. Thinking he must not have heard her correctly, she went to repeat herself—no, she'd *fixed* the android—when Adri came around the corner, wearing the robe she always wore when she wasn't planning on going out. She had a dish towel in her hand and her two daughters trailing in her wake.

"Garan?"

He stumbled back, slamming his shoulder hard into the wall, and everyone froze.

"Don't—" he stammered, smiling apologetically as a droplet of water fell onto his nose. "I've called for an emergency hover."

The curiosity hardened on Adri's face. "Whatever for?"

Cinder pressed herself as far as she could into the wall, feeling like she was pinned between two people who hadn't the faintest idea she was standing there.

Garan folded his arms, starting to shiver. “I’ve caught it,” he whispered, his eyes beginning to water.

Cinder glanced back at Peony, wondering if these words meant something to her, but no one was paying Cinder any attention.

“I’m sorry,” said Garan, coughing. He shuffled back toward the door. “I shouldn’t even have come inside. But I had to say…I had to…” He covered his mouth and his entire body shook with a cough, or a sob, Cinder couldn’t tell which. “I love you all so much. I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Garan.” Adri took half a step forward, but her husband was already turning away. The front door shut a second later, and Pearl and Peony cried out at the same time and rushed forward, but Adri caught them both by their arms. “*Garan!* No—you girls, stay here. Both of you.” Her voice was trembling as she pulled them back, before chasing after Garan herself, her night robe swishing against Cinder’s legs as she passed.

Cinder inched forward so she could see the door being swung open around the corner. Her heart thumped like a drum against her ribs.

“GARAN!” Adri screamed, tears in her voice. “What are you—you can’t go!”

Cinder was slammed against the wall as Pearl tore past her, screaming for her father, then Peony, sobbing.

No one paused. No one looked at Cinder or the android in their hurry for the door. Cinder realized after a moment that she was still gripping the android’s skeletal arm, listening. Listening to the sobs and pleas, the *No*s, the *Daddy*s. The words echoed off the snow and back into the house.

Releasing the android, Cinder hobbled forward. She reached the threshold that overlooked the blindingly white world and paused. Adri and Pearl and Peony were on their knees in the cleared pathway, slush soaking into their clothes, while Garan stood on the curb, a forgotten hand still pressed over his mouth. He looked as if the slightest wind would blow him over into the snowdrifts.

Cinder heard sirens.

“What am I supposed to do?” Adri screamed, her arms covered in goose bumps as they gripped her children against her. “What will I do?”

A door slammed and Cinder looked up. The old man across the street was on his doorstep. More neighbors were emerging—at doors and windows, their gazes bright with curiosity.

Adri sobbed louder, and Cinder returned her attention to the family—her new family—and realized that Garan was watching *her*.

She stared back, her throat burning from the cold.

The sirens became louder and Garan glanced down at his huddled wife, his terrified daughters. “My girls,” he said, trying to smile, and then a white hover with flashing lights turned the corner, screaming its arrival.

Cinder ducked back into the doorway as the hover slid up behind Garan and settled into the snow. Two androids rolled out of its side door with a gurney hovering between them. Their yellow sensors flashed.

“A comm was received at 17:04 regarding a victim of letumosis at this address,” said one of the androids in a sterile voice.

“That’s me,” Garan choked—his words instantly drowned out by Adri’s screaming, “NO! Garan! You can’t. You can’t!”

Garan attempted a shaken smile and held out his arm. He rolled up his sleeve and even from her spot on the doorstep Cinder could see two dark spots on his wrist. “I have it. Adri, love, you must take care of the girl.”

Adri pulled back as if he’d struck her. “*The girl?*”

“Pearl, Peony,” Garan continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “be good for your mother. Never forget that I love you so, so very much.” Releasing the hard-won smile, he perched himself uncertainly on the floating gurney.

“Lie back,” said one of the androids. “We will input your identification into our records and alert your family immediately of any changes in your condition.”

“No, Garan!” Adri clambered to her feet, her thin slippers sliding on the ice and nearly sending her onto her face as she struggled to rush after her husband. “You can’t leave me. Not by myself, not with…not with this *thing!*”

Cinder shuddered and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“Please stand back from the letumosis victim,” said one of the androids, positioning itself between Adri and the hover as Garan was lifted into its belly.

“Garan, no! NO!”

Pearl and Peony latched back on to their mother’s sides, both screaming for their father, but perhaps they were too afraid of the androids to go any closer. The androids rolled themselves back up into the hover. The doors shut. The sirens and the lights filled up the quiet suburb before fading slowly away. Adri and her daughters stayed clumped together in the snow,

sobbing and clutching each other while the neighbors watched. While Cinder watched, wondering why her eyes stayed so dry—stinging dry—when dread was encompassing her like slush freezing over.

"What's happened?"

Cinder glanced down. The android had woken up and disconnected herself from the charging station and now stood before her with her sensor faintly glowing.

She'd done it. She'd fixed the android. She'd proven her worth.

But her success was drowned out by their sobs and the memory of the sirens. She couldn't quite grasp the unfairness of it.

"They took Garan away," she said, licking her lips. "They called him a letumosis victim."

A series of clicks echoed inside the android's body. "Oh, dear…not Garan."

Cinder barely heard her. In saying the words, she realized that her brain had been downloading information for some time, but she'd been too caught up in everything to realize it. Now dozens of useless bits of information were scrolling across her vision. ***Letumosis, also called the Blue Fever or the Plague, has claimed thousands of lives since the first known victims of the disease died in northern Africa in May of 114 T.E….*** Cinder read faster, scanning until she found the words that she feared, but had somehow known she would find. ***To date, there have been no known survivors.***

Iko was speaking again and Cinder shook her head to clear it. "—can't stand to see them cry, especially lovely Peony. Nothing makes an android feel more useless than when a human is crying."

Finding it suddenly hard to breathe, Cinder deserted the doorway and slumped back against the inside wall, unable to listen to the sobs any longer. "You won't have to worry about me, then. I don't think I can cry anymore." She hesitated. "Maybe I never could."

"Is that so? How peculiar. Perhaps it's a programming glitch."

She stared down into Iko's single sensor. "A programming glitch."

"Sure. You have programming, don't you?" She lifted a spindly arm and gestured toward Cinder's steel prosthetic. "I have a glitch, too. Sometimes I forget that I'm not human. I don't think that happens to most androids."

Cinder gaped down at Iko's smooth body, beat-up treads, three-fingered prongs, and wondered what it would be like to be stuck in such a body and

not know if you were human or robot.

She raised the pad of her finger to the corner of her right eye, searching for wetness that wasn't there.

"Right. A glitch." She feigned a nonchalant smile, hoping the android couldn't detect the grimace that came with it. "Maybe that's all it is."

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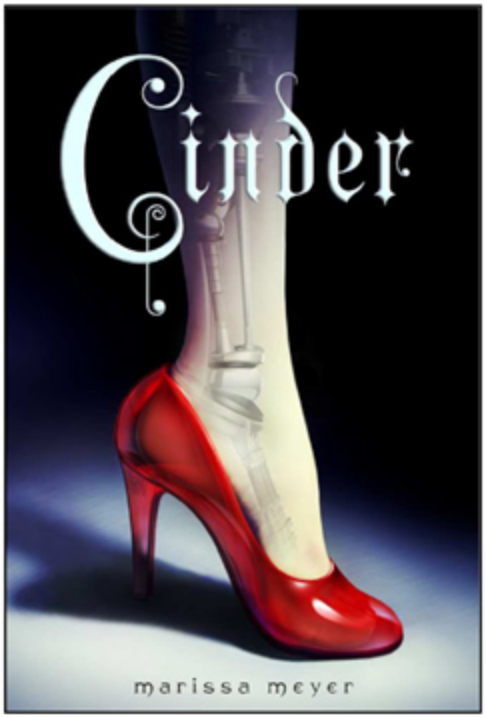
Cinder

EVEN IN THE FUTURE THE STORY BEGINS WITH
ONCE UPON A TIME . . . .



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